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The current body of literature on educational leadership is very broad, and there is limited research regarding the experiences and challenges of the early/middle college high school (EMCHS) principalship. To better support EMCHS principals through the various challenges and experiences of their leadership roles, it would be wise to develop a specific understanding of this particular principalship. This understanding could possibly lead to differentiated support that could benefit both current and future EMCHS principals.

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the EMCHS principalship by answering the following research questions: (a) What are the challenges and experiences of early/middle college high school principals?; (b) How do early/middle college high school principals navigate these challenges and experiences?; and (c) How do current and former early/middle college high school principals understand the meaning of culturally responsive leadership (CRL) and how does it influence their practice?

Through a qualitative approach that incorporated interviews and observations, I found that EMCHS principals experience feelings of professional loneliness. This loneliness is associated with the various non-traditional responsibilities they must fulfill and the fact that they may be the only K-12 administrator in the building as well as the only Early/Middle College (EMCHS) principal in the district. It is through shared and

distributive leadership practices, and the establishment of peer and district supports, that EMCHS principals attempt to address their sense of professional isolation. Having to meet the requirements and demands of both their college partner and school district was another common challenge that EMCHS principals faced. Participants typically navigated this challenge through effective communication and advocacy between the EMCHS principal and both their school district and college partner.

I also found that the small sizes of their schools coupled with their target student populations served as both a benefit and challenge to EMCHS principals. Finally, the data from this study informs us that current and former EMCHS principals understand culturally responsive leadership requires them to develop a keen understanding of the student populations whom they serve. Moreover, principals from the study asserted that cultural responsiveness is not limited to racial diversity alone. Finally, current and former EMCHS principals described how they were intentional about helping their schools and faculty practice cultural responsiveness in addressing the needs of their students.

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE EXPERIENCES AND  
CHALLENGES OF THE EARLY/MIDDLE COLLEGE HIGH  
SCHOOL PRINCIPALSHIP

by

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

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This doctoral dissertation is dedicated to my son Levi Anthony Harris. May God strengthen me to be a suitable example and model for you. I love you son. This dissertation is also dedicated to my Nana, Evette Brewer and Great Grandmother, Dorothy Handy White. You both have been such a major influence on my life. I know the both of you are smiling down from Heaven on me. I miss and love you both.

## APPROVAL PAGE

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Throughout my years as an educator, I have always found it important to take advantage of every learning and growth opportunity that presented itself. During and even before my tenure as a school administrator, I participated in countless principal professional development sessions, leadership trainings, leadership conferences, and educational leadership preparation programs, and remained in the pursuit of advanced educational degrees. With all the leadership preparation in which I have participated, I developed a strong confidence in my ability to lead as a school principal. However, as I stepped into my very first principalship, I quickly learned that I was not as prepared as I would have liked for my specific placement and my confidence began to fade.

I immediately realized the complexity of my role as an early/middle college high school (EMCHS) principal. I recognized I had to grow and adapt to meet the specific needs of this setting. For me the learning curve was steep. While many of the lessons I learned in my principal preparation programs, other leadership workshops, and graduate studies helped to prepare me for the principalship in general, none of those experiences provided me with any specific support or a foundation to lead an EMCHS. During my time in this role, I have come to realize that my experiences are significantly different from (not easier or harder than) some of my peers in comprehensive high schools, or traditional schools in general. I also quickly came to realize that with leading an

extremely diverse (including race, religion, gender, and economic status) student population, more than a basic understanding of culturally responsive leadership would be vital. At the same time, I am a third-year principal attempting to effectively manage all the nuances of the principalship (including but not limited to school reform mandates), meet the specific needs of my urban setting, navigate the unique conditions of the EMCHS setting, and discover who I am and want to be as a school leader. My situation is not uncommon, as many school principals find themselves in complex situations as novice school leaders. Spillane and Lee (2013) explain the principalship as a position with competing roles involving instructional, managerial, and political functions. They go on to share that this conflict in competing roles can cause identity dilemmas for new principals. While my experience of these complexities, challenges, and conditions has been short-lived, my review of literature, coupled with prior personal experiences, has allowed me to develop a solid understanding of the many dynamics of the principalship.

### **Problem**

The body of literature that covers the field of education is robust. Researchers have studied effective practices in classrooms, school culture, variables impacting student achievement, parent engagement, and how to effectively perform various roles. There is also a significant amount of research on educational leadership and effective leadership practices. However, many studies of leadership are very broad and do not take into consideration the unique and specific experiences and conditions that principals face in different types of schools, for example, the unique experiences and challenges EMCHS principals face.

In the conclusion of Philip Hallinger's (2011) study of 40 years of research in the field of educational leadership, he argues that

we [educational leadership researchers] need to obtain better information not just about 'what works' but 'what works' in different settings. This research will require both quantitative and qualitative studies that describe successful leadership practices across different school levels, at different points in the 'school improvement journey' and across different cultures. This is an ambitious but worthy agenda. (p. 138)

One setting that merits further consideration is EMCHS. These are public high schools located on higher education campuses that focus on providing high school students with college experiences and exposure. The primary goal of these schools is to have students graduate high school with both a high school diploma and an associate's degree, career/industry certificate, or up to 2 years of transferable college credits within 5 years. This is an educational opportunity that can drastically change the academic and social trajectories of students. This opportunity can open doors that, because of marginalization and life circumstances, would have otherwise been closed to certain groups of students. According to Le and Frankfort (2011), EMCHS are intended to serve students who have the opportunity to be first-generation college goers or high school graduates, are underrepresented in college, or experience other factors that would put them at risk of dropping out of high school.

In my research, I explored the experiences and challenges of the EMCHS principalship and how principals navigate these challenges. Because of the diverse student populations (students who are minoritized, economically disadvantaged, and at risk of dropping out) these schools typically attract and serve, I also uncovered current

and former EMCHS principals' understandings of culturally responsive leadership and how it plays out in their school settings.

Serving as a principal in the 21st century is challenging. Implementing the mandates and policies that come with school reform efforts has proven to be laborious and exhaustive, overwhelming the very staff and administration that have to execute such mandates, resulting in high rates of both teacher and administrator turnover (Edmunds, 2005; Rousmanierre, 2013; West, Peck, & Reitzug, 2010). To strengthen the education field, we must support our principals. When considering the multitude of factors (school type, school level, principal years of experience, principal competency, school demographics, school reform, etc.) that can contribute to challenges of the principalship, it would seem logical to differentiate the support provided to principals based on their particular institutional contexts and personal needs. When considering necessary supports for school leaders, Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, and Levy (2007) explain that “differentiated leadership is based on the assumption that conditions facing leaders vary sufficiently to call for distinct skill sets and mental models” (Duke et al., 2007, p. 4). Unfortunately, the idea of “differentiated leadership” is not always taken into consideration in school districts or even scholarly research. However, schools have unique needs and identities, and thus it is logical that they would need principals with specific skills and characteristics suited to accommodate those unique needs. Rich (2011) makes this claim in relation to EMCHS, suggesting that because these “schools have a different type of student and instructional focus, there is a need for a different type of principal to lead these alternative high schools to increase student achievement” (p. 2).



Additionally, because of the varying needs of schools, principals need individualized support that will enhance their skillsets in relation to the specific needs of the schools in which they serve. For instance, while being a strong disciplinarian may be an attribute for a principal in one school setting, that same trait in a principal of another school could be of no consequence or even detrimental. In fact, in summation of his research on characteristics of effective EMCHS principals, Rich (2011) argues that

not all [principal] traits are fixed with regard to their impact on leadership development, emergence, and success. Moreover, traits and attributes themselves may evolve over time and change depending on the dynamic exchange between the leader, follower, and context, suggesting that traits are not either/or but a matter of degree in shaping leadership effectiveness, emergence, and development. (p. 7)

In order to better support principals through the various struggles and stressors of their leadership roles, it would be wise to develop a specific understanding of the principalship in various settings and under various conditions. This conceptual understanding could possibly lead to the differentiated support that could benefit principals at all points and places in their tenures.

In their study on the perceived challenges of principals leading low-performing schools, Duke et al. (2007) explain that “gaining resources and support for generic prescriptions to address generic problems is far easier and more straightforward than trying to differentiate responses to troubling situations based on nuanced assessments of localized needs” (p. 3). This convenient response to addressing principal challenges often leads to a “one-size-fits-all” approach to job roles and responsibilities. When considering administrator preparation, this approach becomes evident. Duke et al. (2007) suggest that

principal preparation programs provide students with wide and broad training for leading schools versus providing individualized training on specific school types and needs.

While certain universities may have courses or tracks that pay close attention to urban school or school turnaround leadership, for example, some will argue that the prevailing criticism of principal preparation programs is that they are too broad and lack specificity (Duke et al., 2007).

Additionally, in their review of the current research literature on culturally responsive leadership, Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016) argue that “there is a need for leadership preparation programs to emphasize culturally responsive leadership” (p. 1288). In fact, in her study of white school leaders in urban school settings, Touré (2008) criticized educational leadership training programs that had only a limited (if any at all) focus on culturally responsive leadership and identified them as “poor.” She went on to call for a “reexamination of requirements for leadership preparation which currently lack an emphasis on culturally relevant leadership content knowledge or issues of social justice” (Touré, 2008, p. 200). In a qualitative study that examined principals’ perceptions of their ability to address diversity in schools, Young, Madsen, and Young (2010) found that the participating principals were neither adequately prepared or equipped to lead in diverse schools or implement strategies to address diversity issues in their schools, nor were these principals able to even participate in effective discourse concerning diversity in schools. With the demographic shifts in today’s schools, causing schools to be more racially, economically, socially, gender, religiously, and linguistically diverse, it is vital that we prepare our principals to be culturally responsive leaders.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of my qualitative study was to identify the experiences and challenges of the EMCHS principalship, and to highlight what principals in these settings do to navigate these experiences and challenges. Additionally, in this study I sought to identify principals' levels of understanding of culturally responsive leadership and how (or if) this is evident in their school settings. As options for at-risk high school students, the EMCHS model has proven to be a promising intervention that provides alternatives for groups of students that have historically struggled in traditional high school settings. These EMCHS settings are identified as ways to increase high school graduation rates and address the need for students to be prepared for and attend college (Edmunds et al., 2012). While this intervention was introduced over 40 years ago, it has recently gained popularity among school districts across the country. For example, in North Carolina, the state where this study takes place, there are over 75 EMCHSs that serve over 15,000 students.

EMCHSs are intended to serve diverse student populations. Edmunds (2012) noted, "the target population for these schools is students for whom the entrance into college has historically been more challenging, including students who are low income, the first in their family to go to college, or members of minority groups that are underrepresented in college" (p. 82). Because ECMHSs target these specific student populations, principals in these settings have a grand opportunity to play a role in creating spaces where racial, economic, and other issues can be challenged through culturally responsive leadership practices. Current research from educational leaders like

Jobs for the Future (2017) and Edmunds (2012) suggest that EMCHSs are experiencing high levels of success in graduating minoritized, economically impacted students from high school with associate's degrees and transferable college credits. When we consider the positive contributions this model can have on the economy, along with the fact that the *No Child Left Behind Act* experienced a lack of success in narrowing racial and economic achievement gaps, it is likely that we will start to see the EMCHS model replicated more frequently throughout the country (Webb, 2014).

Through my research study I took a close look at the EMCHS principalship and identified the common conditions, experiences, and challenges that these principals face. I also identified some of the practical action steps they use to navigate these experiences and challenges. Additionally, I was able to determine if and how principals demonstrate culturally responsive leadership. The findings of my study offer compelling insight into this unique principalship, and can contribute to the existing literature in hopes to provide for a smoother transition for future EMCHS leaders. With a deeper understanding of the EMCHS principalship, newly appointed principals should be better off and less likely to fall into unexpected difficulties, maintaining the current successes of this school model.

### **Research Questions**

Through my research study I answered the following questions:

- What are the challenges and experiences of early/middle college high school principals?
- How do early/middle college high school principals navigate these challenges and experiences?

- How do current and former early/middle college high school principals understand the meaning of culturally responsive leadership and how does it influence their practice?

### **Context**

In this section, I provide some background context for my study by discussing some of the rationale for high school reform. Understanding the circumstances that have influenced current reform efforts is pivotal to making sense of how and why EMCHSs were established. Also in this section I discuss the small school movement, a popular reform model that includes EMCHSs and various types of non-traditional schools. The context surrounding small school settings is important because they share similar characteristics, structures, and outcomes as EMCHS models. Note that I provide an extended definition of the EMCHS model and a discussion of research literature related to culturally responsive leadership in my review of literature in Chapter II.

### **Reform Rationale**

In the educational setting, one size almost never fits all. This is also true for educational reform efforts, as what works in one location may not work in another. In districts all across the nation, there is an overwhelming number of students who are unsuccessful in traditional high schools. In fact, “the achievement gap continues to be a national concern, as low-income and ethnic minority children perform at levels below those of children from higher income families and European American children” (Dotterer, Iruka, & Pungello, 2012, p. 657). Regardless of why schools are experiencing an inability to grow students from all races, socioeconomic statuses, and with varying

levels of parental involvement, the outcome ends up the same: certain students dropping out.

Looking at the North Carolina context, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's (NCDPI's) annual report to the NC General Assembly in 2015 states that there were 11,190 dropouts in 2014-2015 in North Carolina alone. This was an increase of 786 student from the 10,404 total reported in 2013-2014. An astonishing 58.3% (67 of 115) of the Local Educational Agencies reported having increases in their dropout numbers in this time period (NCDPI, 2015). With new legislation after legislation, education systems have attempted to address the needs of underserved or at-risk student populations through mentoring programs, anti-bullying and discrimination policies, minority student initiatives, school- or district-wide behavior management systems, parental involvement funds, alternative diploma tracks, extracurricular activities, staff diversity trainings, Title I funding, and countless other federal, state, and local intervention initiatives (Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Brown, 2007; Cosner & Jones, 2016; Daly, Der-Martirosian, Ong-Dean, Park, & Wishard-Guerra, 2011; Dotterer et al., 2012; Edmunds, 2005). It is important to note that the majority of these school interventions and reform efforts take place in the most highly impacted neighborhoods and school districts.

Peck (2017) describes how the country's educational policymakers consistently exhibit a strong belief that reform is essential to increasing the likelihood of success for poor and minority children. Since policymakers are so confident in school reform efforts, it seems likely that they will look more carefully at those reform efforts that have proven

to be successful (i.e., EMCHS models), causing an increase in these models across the country.

### **Small School Movement**

Because EMCHS are within the “small schools” family, gaining an understanding of the nature and benefits of small schools is important in drawing connections and developing an understanding of the EMCHS setting. Small school settings are not only different in size and location, but this reform usually includes a level of leadership autonomy. These school settings are expected to look different organizationally, and with curriculum and instructional practices. Small school reform is a commonly used term in education that encapsulates several varying small school models that generally share the same purpose. While their purposes may be similar, their implementation and design can vary from school district to school district (Peters, 2011). The small school movement has grown increasingly popular as a primary option for high school reform. Iatarola, Schwartz, Stiefel, and Chellman (2008) argue that “high school reform is currently at the center stage of education policy making, coming on the heels of nearly a decade of reform focused on elementary and middle schools” (p. 1838). The rationale for focusing on and reforming our high schools lies in the stagnant state of national assessment scores, consistent achievement gaps along racial and economic lines, and low graduation rates in urban areas (Iatarola et al., 2008; Peters, 2011; Smerdon & Cohen, 2009).

To address these academic and social issues, Bloom and Unterman (2014) identify school voucher and charter programs, school reconstitution, and the creation of new small schools as three of the main high school reform options to date. Small school

reform models have also taken on a few other forms. In fact, since the late 1960s, we have seen the implementation of alternative schools for students who are not successful in the traditional school settings, and then we saw the development of dropout prevention and EMCHS model options (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The most current of these small school reform models is the closing and transformation of large comprehensive high schools into smaller school settings, and the school within a school model (Iatarola et al., 2008; Peters, 2011).

While small school reform was advocated for prior to the late 1990s, it was not until then that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) started investing their financial resources into the creation of small schools which facilitated the expansion of this model across the country. In less than 10 years, the BMGF had provided grant money, totaling approximately \$647 million, to over 100 school districts to create small schools (Bloom & Unterman, 2014). This has proven to be an impactful financial investment on the behalf of the BMGF. The research on small school settings suggests that student achievement, grade promotion and attendance, graduation and dropout rates, school engagement, social development, and academic curricula can all be positively affected in small school settings (Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Peters, 2011; Shiller, 2011; Stiefel, Schwartz, & Wiswall, 2015).

### **Methods**

The context around reform rationale and the small school movement, coupled with the research on the EMCHS setting that I present later in the literature review, provide a basis of background knowledge that support my research. In this study, I



established an understanding of the challenges and experiences of EMCHS principals, gained an understanding of how EMCHS principals navigate these experiences and challenges, and determined how EMCHS principals thought about and employed culturally responsive leadership. I conducted a basic qualitative research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I conducted two rounds of interviews—an initial round with 11 acting and former principals of EMCHSs, and a follow-up round with three of the 11 selected participants to dig deeper into participants’ personal experiences. I created and utilized a semi-structured interview guide in both rounds of interviews. I hired a professional transcriber to transcribe all the interviews and then I coded them, identifying the common themes that emerged across multiple participants in regard to common challenges and experiences of the principalship in the EMCHS setting. To collect additional data, I conducted three 4-hour-long observations of a typical workday with the three principal participants from the second round of interviews. I used a simple observation protocol to help capture the principals’ actions in relation to challenges of the job and supporting marginalized students.

### **Significance**

With the current state of education and constant attempts at reform after reform, it is possible that there could be a drastic change over the next few years to our educational landscape. In his 1990 article on the constant and repetitive nature of school reform efforts, Larry Cuban (1990) states that

reform visions often depend on a view of the past as a series of failures that killed a golden age of schooling. Critics’ claims about what happened in schools in

earlier decades and policymakers' assumptions about the past often become rationales for reform. (p. 3)

Hess (2010) adds that, despite repeated reform efforts, the United States has tripled its per-student spending since the 1970s and yielded little to no increases in student achievement. Whether it is an increase in private and charter school funding, statewide teacher and school performance incentive programs, or a recurrence of school reform efforts from previous decades, the current prevailing rhetoric that suggests our public-school system is failing can have major implications on policymakers' decisions to continue reforming public education. With continued school reform efforts, new and innovative educational practices will continue to emerge.

When considering graduation and attendance rates of EMCHSs, high school academies, and similar small school settings versus traditional and comprehensive high school settings, we see a glimpse of hope (Edmunds et al., 2012). Thanks to their small settings, low student-to-teacher ratios, and flexibility to provide support to address the non-academic needs of the students they serve, many EMCHS have been successful in serving a population that has not been traditionally served well. Because of this success, it is likely that we will see an increase in the creation of more EMCHSs across the country. If reform models such as EMCHS continue to grow in popularity, these new school models will need confident and competent leaders with a strong understanding of the unique qualities and conditions of these schools and of culturally responsive leadership. Likewise, if the success of these schools is to be replicated in other locations,

then it seems important that we have a good understanding of what leadership in these schools entails and how principals navigate the experiences associated with this setting.

Edmunds, Willse, Arshavsky, and Dallas (2013) state that “as a relatively new intervention, early colleges have a limited but growing research base” (p. 7). I hope that my research adds to the existing knowledge and provides some valuable and pertinent information on the conditions, experiences, and challenges of the EMCHS principalship.

With a better understanding of the unique experiences associated with leading in these settings, I hope to be able to help EMCHS principals avoid any of the common pitfalls and offer practical strategies that can be used to navigate this unique setting.

Additionally, the results of my research study could lead to specific educational, professional development, and coaching opportunities for principals as they transition into the EMCHS principalship. This intentional preparation could lessen the already steep learning curve for principals new to this unique setting, helping them to be more effective and efficient. When principals are efficient with their time and resources, they are able to more effectively meet the needs of their diverse populations, tend to school priorities, and positively affect teaching, learning, and student performance.

### **Overview of the Dissertation**

In Chapter II of this research study, I review the literature related to leadership in the EMCHS setting. I divide the chapter into four major sections. In the first section, I analyze the research surrounding the principalship in general, including its complexities and challenges. I discuss issues that impact the principalship such as school accountability, novice school leadership, and characteristics of effective school

principals. The second section includes a discussion surrounding culturally responsive leadership, poverty, social justice, and urban school settings. In the third section, I examine the components affecting small school settings such as characteristics of effective principals, and characteristics of small schools in general. In the fourth and final section, I examine the EMCHS setting as a whole, and a sample of the limited literature on the characteristics of EMCHS principals.

In the third chapter, I describe the methodology for this study. To collect the necessary data on the principalship in the EMCHS setting, I conducted interviews and observations of current and former EMCHS principals. I employed these methods in an effort to identify common trends in principals' challenges and experiences, their navigation strategies, and the extent to which they understand and demonstrate culturally responsive leadership. In Chapter IV, I report the findings from my study, highlighting key themes and concepts that surfaced. Chapter V includes analysis of my study's findings in relation to the existing literature. I also discuss the implications of my research.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of my literature review is to paint an in-depth picture of the literature surrounding issues and components related to the early/middle college high school (EMCHS) principalship. The literature on the principalship experience is plentiful and even the literature on culturally responsive leadership and small school settings, such as EMCHSs, is growing. However, there is little research that specifically addresses the experiences of principals within the EMCHS setting.

I organized this literature review around four major sections. First, I discuss research on the principalship in general, not limiting this section to any one type of principalship. Instead, I address the complexity of the principal position, and the implications for novice and first-year principals that affect these leaders at all levels and in all types of schools. I also explore the implications of the school reform movement. While principals may experience these issues differently, each of these components can have major implications on a school, regardless of its classification of traditional/comprehensive or nontraditional/small school setting. In this section I also discussed a brief review of the characteristics of effective school principals.

In the second section, I discuss the literature surrounding Culturally Responsive Leadership (CRL). In regard to CRL, I provided a definition, characteristics associated with this form of leadership, and the effects of CRL. Additionally, I discuss the

implications of poverty, urban school settings, and social injustice on the principalship. In the third section, I explore the research on small school settings. Within this section, I discuss the characteristics and conditions of small school settings, along with the implications of these settings on the principalship. I also explore how small school settings affect students and their academic outcomes, along with the characteristics of their acting principals. Finally, in the fourth section, I examine the current literature on the EMCHS model, including the definition, components and characteristics, history, purpose, effectiveness, and both local and national landscapes. Additionally, in this section I discuss the limited literature available that speaks specifically to the principalship of EMCHS settings.

### **The Principalship**

In this section regarding research related to the “principalship,” I discuss the impact and complexity of the principal position, the experiences of novice principals, and the implications of the school reform movement. Additionally, I discuss the characteristics of effective school principals. While this is not an exhaustive list of all the conditions and challenges that impact the 21st century principal, these subsections are a representation of the common themes in today’s literature on the principalship, including ECMHS principals.

#### **Impact of the Principal**

With the many nuances, components, factors, and challenges that affect the daily operations of schools, one may wonder, “Why is there so much focus on the principal?” A significant reason is that “it turns out that leadership not only matters: it is second only

to teaching among school-related factors in its impact on student learning” (Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 3). Leithwood et al. (2004) go on to argue that school leadership is most impactful in schools in which students have the most acute learning needs. In fact, in reference to one of the most indispensable characteristics of effective schools, Edmonds (1979) shares that “they [effective schools] have strong administrative leadership without which the disparate elements of good schooling can neither be brought together nor kept together” (p. 22).

Without effective leadership, schools can lack the vision and direction needed to ensure academic success for all students. This lack of vision makes it impossible for school priorities to be identified and addressed. Additionally, ineffective leadership makes it difficult for teachers and other staff members to grow and emerge as leaders, as “key members of school faculties can also play important leadership roles” (Duke, 2008, p. 670). Some educators and scholars argue that the leadership of the principal is the single most important determiner of a school’s success or failure. Duke (2008) states that “not surprisingly, declining schools frequently are characterized by a lack of leadership” (p. 670). If we are to improve educational climates and situations for our students, we must support and develop the principals of our school. In a quantitative study on the connection between school leaders’ behaviors and student achievement, researchers found that leadership variables such as trust in the principal, instructional leadership ability, and shared leadership collectively have a positive impact on student learning (Seashore Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010).

### **Challenges of Novice and First-Year Principals**

While the principalship is known to be riddled with challenges, it is important to consider the additional challenges experienced by first year and novice principals. Current research on the experiences of novice school principals informs us that “these administrators experience intense feelings of anxiety, isolation, and frustration as they become familiar with the expectations of them as principals, as well as the specific expectations that their school staff members have of them as leaders” (Lochmiller, 2014, p. 62). In a study that analyzed the experiences and perceptions of over 50 first-year and novice principals in Canadian rural school settings, novice principals reported that “the actual work and world of the principalship was quite different from what they [principals] had observed of others prior to becoming principals” (Walker, Anderson, Sackney, & Woolf, 2003, p. 198). This lack of connection between perception and practice is common for new and inexperienced principals. There are a litany of responsibilities, duties, and pressures that are often underestimated by those outside of the principal role, even by assistant principals, teacher leaders, and academic coaches.

The participants in the Walker et al. (2003) study revealed that the complexity of their role and related responsibilities took them by surprise as novice and first-year principals. Similarly, in a longitudinal mixed methods study that included multiple interviews with 17 novice Chicago public school principals, Spillane and Lee (2013) describe novice principals’ sense of surprise as “responsibility shock” that results from the fact that principals are held solely responsible for the decisions and outcomes for their schools. Spillane and Lee (2013) explained,



A consistent theme in new principals' accounts, even prior to the start of their first academic year on the job, was the shock of responsibility that came with entering the principal occupation . . . Their accounts not only stressed the shock of more or greater responsibility that accompanied their transition into the principal's office but also a sense of being ultimately responsible for their school. (p. 442)

The principalship is a role that many perceive to be less strenuous than it actually is, but one only attains a true understanding of the role once they are actually in the principal seat. In fact, studies have shown that school administrators are leaving principal preparation programs inadequately prepared for the roles they aspire to fill (Nelson, de la Colina, & Boone, 2008).

Novice and first-year principals also experience a level of professional loneliness. For instance, Spillane and Lee's (2013) study found that "new principals often struggle with feelings of professional isolation and loneliness as they transition into a role that carries ultimate responsibility and decision-making powers" (p. 433). This feeling of "professional loneliness" is important in the context of EMCHS principals, since they are the only administrator in the building and often the only EMCHS principal in the district. Additionally, new principals will always have to live with being compared to their predecessors. In their study, Spillane and Lee (2013) argue that "members of the school community not only compare the new principal to the previous one but also often resist changes to the routines and culture to which they have become accustomed" (p. 433). This resistance to change is common. In fact, deciding whether to support, reprimand, or counsel-out difficult or resistant staff is a process that is so pivotal that any mistakes on the principal's part could have dire consequences.

In addition to the stress brought about by an increased sense of responsibility, novice principals also experience stress and turmoil during the many decision-making processes through which they run their school. I would add from experience that this stress develops from a principal's inability to please everyone with any one decision. This is especially the case when principals need to make decisions that are in the best interest of the entire school community, but face opposition from student, teacher, or parent stakeholder groups (Spillane & Lee, 2013). This pressure to always do the "right thing" or make the "right decision" yields further stress in novice principals, and this stress can manifest itself in different ways for different individuals. In reference to their study's participants, Spillane and Lee (2013) make note that

With their sense of ultimate responsibility came increased stress, a constant alertness to what might go wrong, and an inability to leave the job behind even on weekends. This stress was manifest in novices' reports of things such as sleep loss, physical exhaustion, frustration, nervousness, and constant worrying. (p. 444)

As noted, the stresses of the principalship for novice leaders can take a physical toll; hence, continued leadership support throughout their early years is critical.

Research suggests that novice principals experience a sense of ultimate responsibility, unfamiliarity with their new role, professional isolation, and various other challenges that are associated with being a first-year or novice school principal (Lochmiller, 2014; Spillane & Lee, 2013; Walker et al., 2003). These challenges have proven to be major stressors for new principals. The research on novice principals is

related to my study because it can help to provide some insight on the experience principals of EMCHSs face at the start of their tenure in a relatively new school model.

### **Complexity of the Principalship**

In the current landscape of public education, the role of the principal has become significantly challenging. James Helf (2012) reminds us that

principals are responsible for establishing and maintaining a vision that is focused on school goals, strategically allocating staff and other resources to ensure that goals are met, build trust and facilitate a professional learning community, closely monitor teaching and learning, and analyze and interpret data to improve classroom and organizational practices, all while ensuring that the school is a safe learning environment for students and staff. (p. 1)

This multitude of non-instructional and managerial responsibility, coupled with high expectations and a need to focus attention on learning for all subgroups of students, makes the role of a school principal extremely difficult (McKoy, 2012). Over the years, as the role of a principal has transitioned from managerial based to instructional leadership focused, “the job has become multidimensional and requires expertise in curriculum, management, mentoring, assessment, human resources, and education law” (Helf, 2012, p. 1).

As the principal position has evolved over time, it now requires principals to wear a plethora of metaphoric hats and have an extended list of responsibilities which include, but are not limited to, being a counselor, mentor, instructional coach, disciplinarian, child advocate, teacher advocate, custodian, building manager, instructional leader, and morale builder. Rousmaniere (2013) describes the public school principalship as the most complex and contradictory role in education. If not managed properly, these conflicting

roles and responsibilities can cause inward turmoil for principals. Rousmaniere (2013) shares that

the principal is both the administrative director of state educational policy and a building manager, both an advocate for school change and the protector of bureaucratic stability. Authorized to be employer, supervisor, professional figurehead, and inspirational leader, the principal's core training and identity is as a classroom teacher. A single person, in a single professional role, acts on a daily basis as the connecting link between a large bureaucratic system and the individual daily experiences of a large number of children and adults. Most contradictory of all, the principal has always been responsible for student learning, even as the position has become increasingly disconnected from the classroom. (p. 2)

These conflicting and contradictory roles are caused by the political pulls and powers of the many stakeholders in public education. In fact, in instances where schools have been placed under state or federal mandates, this list of stakeholders and political implications can be magnified. As a middle manager, the principal's role is to implement top down educational policy from central office into classrooms. While promoting these system-wide initiatives, principals must also strategically address the immediate issues that these policies can cause within a school or its community (Rousmaniere, 2013). Finding balance in tending to the many, often conflicting responsibilities of the principalship is pivotal to the success of any principal regardless of the years of experience they have or the type of school in which they lead.

Increased emphasis on school accountability in the last two decades has added another stressor to the position. Due to school accountability models, principals are now working to hit a moving target with rubber bullets. The litany of tests that must be administered to students, coupled with the pressures to perform well on those

assessments can often pigeonhole principals (especially those who are novice) into ignoring the curriculum of life for the standards of a test. Unsurprisingly, in West and colleagues' (2010) study of principals' daily lives, principals expressed their frustration with the re-norming of mandated assessments, which make hitting Annual Yearly Progress targets more challenging, ultimately resulting in low scores that give community stakeholders the impression that schools are not improving. Additionally, principals believe that *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) is responsible for schools' increased practice of teaching to the test, at the expense of focusing on the arts and other non-tested subject areas (West et al., 2010).

In his article on the progression of urban school reform in the United States, Peck (2017) explained that in order to hold schools accountable for their student assessment results, districts and states employed the use of performance management policies in assigning grades or ratings to individual schools. While standardized testing results remained the bulk of a school's performance rating, these performance management policies also involve other data points, such as a school's student attendance rate, safety metrics, teacher experience, and teacher turnover rates (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009; O'Day, Bitter, & Gomez, 2011). These annual school performance ratings, influenced by NCLB requirements, are the primary tools used to hold low-performing schools accountable for increasing student achievement levels and overall school performances (Cosner & Jones, 2016). The additional data points used to construct a school's performance rating or grade, along with the added pressures of school closings, add further complexity and stress on acting principals as they work to improve teaching and

learning along with managing and shaping the school's reputation in the community. Cosner and Jones (2016) state, "the public pressure to improve student achievement coupled with the threat of sanctions creates a unique context for low-performing schools to navigate" (p. 43).

The challenges that come along with school accountability measures and increased testing can be overwhelming for many principals, particularly for those who are new to the position or serve in urban school settings (Daly et al., 2011). School leaders are aware of the consequences of not meeting their schools' testing targets, and it is these consequences that often cause additional levels of stress for school principals. When schools receive poor grades or performance ratings, they become inundated with increased monitoring, support plans, and guidance (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009; O'Day et al., 2011). If schools are consistently considered underperforming then they run a high risk of facing even greater sanctions, school closure, and the possibility of school takeover and/or turnaround (Finnigan, Daly, & Stewart, 2012; Kane & Staiger, 2002; Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009).

Due to the pressures associated with school accountability testing, job security, and pay for performance bonuses, novice and inexperienced principals can quickly lose focus of their core values and why they initially decided to enter the field of education (West et al., 2010). When this happens, the pursuit of authentic student learning and development can be compromised in the effort to improve proficiency ratings. Students are not the only collateral damage of standardized test-driven principals. Peck (2017) explains that "in high-stakes turnaround schools, teachers with unsupportive principals

can feel the pressure to focus narrowly on test score improvement to the detriment of other educational goals and put themselves at the risk of burnout and departure” (p. 11).

### **Characteristics of Effective Principals**

In a review of the literature surrounding school leadership actions that yield positive student outcomes in low-performing schools, Cosner and Jones (2016) found that these actions fell into three main categories: “goal setting and planning for goal achievement, promoting and participating in teacher learning, and planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and curriculum” (Cosner & Jones, 2016, p. 41). Other studies on effective school leadership have identified behaviors such as strong communication with stakeholders, establishing clear goals, having quality contact and interaction with teachers and students at a high level, and supporting stakeholders through materials and knowledge can all be significant contributions to principal and leader effectiveness, thereby increasing task performance and student academic achievement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Turner, 2007). Additionally, effective leaders set direction, develop people, promote change, and lead instruction, which are all consequences of positive principal self-efficacy that contributes to principal success (Cosner & Jones, 2016; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Turner, 2007). While the characteristics represented in these studies are not inclusive of the multitude of characteristics that can be considered effective for school principals, they do represent broad, common, consistent, and recurring themes in characteristics of effective school principals.

## **Summary**

As we see from the literature, principals carry a heavy weight on their shoulders. They are 100% responsible for the academic success of their schools and they manage through a multitude of tasks and responsibilities while leveraging resources from competing stakeholders. Also, principals carry around the pressures of added “outside” stressors over which they have little to no control. Standardized testing and pressures of academic achievement that come along with federal, state, and district mandated accountability measures lead, in many cases, to no-win situations in which principals have little control. Yet through all of the challenges of the principalship, we know there are some characteristics that principals exhibit that are correlated with a greater likelihood of school success. Possessing these characteristics can help principals effectively manage the multitude of challenges and complexities of their jobs.

### **Culturally Responsive Leadership and Implications of Poverty**

In this section, I discuss culturally responsive leadership. Regardless of the school setting, CRL practices can support the needs of marginalized groups of students. This type of leadership is relevant in all schools, but especially in EMCHS settings due to the populations they serve. In this section, I describe cultural responsiveness and the effects of this type of leadership and discuss school and leadership characteristics associated with CRL. In this section, I also examine the implications of poverty, urban school contexts, and social justice on the principalship. Having a collective understanding of the research surrounding the principalship, EMCHSs, and small school settings, and viewing



it through the lens of culturally responsive leadership is imperative in order to shed light on the EMCHS principalship.

### **Culturally Responsive Leadership**

Regardless of whether a school's setting is urban or rural, traditional or small, today's schools are more diverse than ever, with students from various countries, races and ethnic groups, and religions. "Historically, these students were expected to check their cultures at the school or classroom door and learn according to the norms of European Americans" (Brown, 2007, p. 61). Culturally responsive leadership (CRL) is an important aspect of school leadership, regardless of a school's location, setting, or demographic breakdown. A body of research suggests that school leaders should be trained and supported in CRL to help them understand the impact that race and poverty have on students and schools and to consider ways that their schools can address the institutional barriers that have a history of marginalizing groups of students (Khalifa et al., 2016; McIver, Kearns, Lyons, & Sussman, 2009).

This research also argues for changing the way educators are currently structuring classrooms, addressing school culture/climate, and modifying the many policies and practices in schools. Various culturally responsive leadership practices can address the cultural needs of all stakeholders and generate positive impact on student outcomes, particularly for students of color (Brown, 2007; Khalifa et al., 2016). Over the years, student populations in school systems have grown to mirror the diversity that we see in our nation today; however, our schools have not always adapted well to this growth in student diversity. Brown (2007) argues, "A positive or negative response could affect

the self-esteem and academic success of students from these varied racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds” (p. 57). Unlike some principals who may claim to not see color, “research suggests that leaders who see and acknowledge race and culture are more effective than those who do not” (McIver et al., 2009, p. 17). In fact, in order for our diverse student populations to be successful, they need effective school leaders. The school leaders that have historically had the most impact on the outcomes of diverse students are those who practice CRL strategies.

In their study regarding school administrators’ perceptions of culturally responsive leadership, Gordon and Ronder (2016) explained that “fostering new meanings about diversity, promoting inclusive practices within schools, and building connections between schools and communities” were main objectives for school leaders who practice CRL (p. 128). After a thorough review of existing literature, Khalifa et al. (2016) reported that culturally responsive school leadership entailed four major strands: Critical Self-Awareness, Culturally Responsive Curricula and Teacher Preparation, Culturally Responsive and Inclusive School Environments, and Engaging Students and Parents in Community Contexts. Khalifa et al. went on to highlight that there is a need for culturally responsive leadership in all school settings, regardless whether students of color are the minority or the majority population. While minoritized students are too often racially oppressed in schools, Khalifa et al. (2016) “further acknowledge that gender, sexuality, income, and other factors lead to even further marginalization” (p. 1275).

Gloria Ladson-Billings's work on culturally relevant teaching practices provided the initial help to start the focus on culturally responsive leadership. She suggested that "culturally relevant teaching must meet three criteria: an ability to develop students academically, a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 483). Khalifa et al. (2016) argue that if teachers must adjust their practices to effectively meet the needs of students with varying social and cultural needs, then school leaders should have parallel requirements when it pertains to the culture and climate of the school at large. When it comes to school leaders' responsibility to effect this needed change in school climate and culture, Khalifa et al. (2016) state that "the right leader will hold an understanding of the need to recruit and sustain culturally responsive teachers who are better prepared to work with poor children of color" (p. 1273). As school leaders, principals play the most important role in ensuring that cultural responsiveness is evident within their school community. Without support and endorsement from principals, "implementation of cultural responsiveness can run the risk of being disjointed or short-lived in a school; and conversely, district-level mandates are only effective to the extent they are locally enforced" (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1274).

Research also suggests that critical self-awareness is at the heart of culturally responsive leadership. All efforts toward CRL, then, should start with the principal's understanding of his/her own values and beliefs as they pertain to serving marginalized groups of students (Khalifa et al., 2016; Taliaferro, 2011). Additionally, when principals have an awareness of their own culture, it serves as a foundation to understanding the

cultures of others (Khalifa et al., 2016; Taliaferro, 2011; Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain-Bradway, 2011). Culturally responsive leaders ensure that all staff members have an opportunity through professional development to develop their own cultural and self-awareness; this is necessary even if staff members share the same economic status, religion, or race as the student population (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011; Guerra & Nelson, 2008; Khalifa et al., 2016; Vincent et al., 2011). Culturally responsive leaders encourage cultural self-awareness because they understand that they must foster their staffs' critical consciousness and assist them in developing their personal cultural awareness (Ahram et al., 2011; Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Guerra & Nelson, 2008; Khalifa et al., 2016; Vincent et al., 2011).

When considering culturally responsive school leadership, Taliaferro (2011) suggests that effective principals are in tune with the students, staff, and communities. They connect to their school communities in ways that foster positive relationships among these stakeholders. Not only is this type of community building an effective school leadership practice, it serves as a primary component of CRL. Garza, Drysdale, Gurr, Jacobson, and Merchant (2014) argue that successful principals reach out into their communities and recognize them as critical partners in school improvement. Effective school principals also worked with families to embrace and support the different cultures and values, which builds social capital (Garza et al., 2014). Additionally, effective principals also understand that "it is important for the students to feel that they are a part of the school community and that their contributions matter" (Taliaferro, 2011, p. 1). Similarly, Johnson (2007) defines culturally responsive leadership practices as "those that

help to empower diverse groups of parents and make the school curriculum more multicultural” (p. 50). Culturally responsive school leaders are intentional about ensuring the “history, values, and cultural knowledge of students’ home communities” are represented throughout the school curriculum. In other words, they work “to develop a critical consciousness among both students and faculty to challenge inequities in the larger society” (Johnson, 2007, p. 50). Finally, Brown (2007) recommends that culturally responsive leaders maintain high expectations for academic achievement, provide scaffolded support to students, encourage strong and authentic student-staff relationships, and build strong bonds between school and community (Brown, 2007). Culturally responsive leaders also utilize student diversity as a school asset and provide staff with adequate training on culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy (Brown, 2007).

### **Implications of Poverty**

Serving as a principal in a school that is highly impacted by poverty adds an additional layer of challenges to the administrator’s already complex roles. In a research study that analyzed the daily lives of acting principals in the 21st century, West and colleagues (2010) interviewed principals about their principalship experiences. West et al. (2010) found that “principals who lead schools where there is a great deal of poverty described additional responsibilities—such as those principals in Title I schools who are required to fill-out endless forms in order to receive the monies that are attached to the Title I guidelines” (p. 130). Additionally, principals who are working with economically disadvantaged students spend endless hours ensuring students’ personal and physical

needs are filled such as food, shelter, transportation, healthcare, and counseling (West et al., 2010).

Unfortunately, students of poverty are more likely to attend low-performing schools. While “common sense” would tell us that our students in greatest need (which often include our students of poverty) should have the best teachers, this is usually not the norm. Principals of urban schools and schools highly impacted by poverty often endure a high level of inexperienced teachers and high teacher turnover. Helig, Khalifa, and Tillman (2014) state that “the reality of public school arrangements today is that the majority of ‘highly qualified’ teachers usually choose to work in high-performing, low-poverty schools” (p. 526). This common arrangement can pose an additional challenge as principals face the pressures and regulations associated with high stakes testing and school accountability. Challenges for principals leading schools with high poverty rates are not limited to only the needs of students within the building; challenges also include managing the effects that poverty has on a school and its community as a whole. Peck (2017), Kantor and Brenzel (1992), and Wilson (2012) maintain that poverty is a prevailing issue in urban education, even more so since the deindustrialization that caused large cities to lose high paying, stable jobs between the 1960s and 1980s. The result of this socioeconomic change was that chronic, multi-generational poverty engulfed many of these urban communities. This phenomenon in communities across the United States had a great impact on our schools, hence the importance of school leaders serving as community leaders and encouraging change in both arenas.

Social inequalities in our nation have proven to affect the educational experiences of students of color. These inequalities have created what is popularly known as an educational gap, or the disproportionality between students of color and White students in academic achievement, discipline, graduation rates, dropout rates, and exceptional children representations. Ladson-Billings (2006) describes this as an “‘education debt’, that has accumulated over time” (p. 3). This debt, she explains, is comprised of historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral components (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Poverty is also a pernicious concern. Putnam (2015) argues that there is a stark difference in the amount of money, time, and community resources spent on children from “rich” (college educated) families versus those from “poor” (no high school diploma) families. Children in poverty are read to less frequently and have fewer opportunities for extracurricular activities. They also attend lower-performing schools and experience less family stability. School principals are responsible for educating each and every student who walks through their doors; when they serve students from poverty, they are challenged with meeting the many needs that they bring with them (Cosner & Jones, 2016; Putnam, 2015).

As educational leaders, principals play pivotal roles in leading social change. They can have a large impact on eliminating the gap in our country between economically advantaged and disadvantaged children. Through his 2-year ethnographic research study, Khalifa (2012) argued that a school principal who focused on issues of equity and community outreach and support brought about the change needed in his school’s local community. Khalifa (2012) explained, “the community-based leadership

performed by principals must be coupled with a deep understanding of the surrounding neighborhood community being served” (p. 427). Similarly, McIver et al. (2009) asserted that success for poor students and students of color is “predicated upon school leaders understanding and appreciating the rich diversity of student, family, faculty, and community backgrounds” (p. 33). In order to effectively practice community-based leadership, then, principals must first take the time needed to establish trusting relationships among parent and community stakeholders (Khalifa, 2012; McIver et al., 2009).

### **Principals in an Urban School Setting**

Regardless of how they are geographically situated, in many instances EMCHSs serve student populations that some researchers would describe as “urban.” Louis and Kruse (1995) describe “poor, minority or first-generation immigrant students” as key characteristics of urban students (p. 5). Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2005) describe urban schools as “schools with high concentrations of poor, non-white, and low-performing students” (p. 113). EMCHSs were designed to serve students from poverty, students of color, English language learners, and students who have the opportunity to be the first in their family to attend college. Thus, EMCHSs are often classified as “urban” schools (DiMaria, 2013). In his attempt to assign a definition to the term “urban” as it pertains to a school setting, Milner (2012) provides three specific categories. The first is urban intensive, which describes schools that are concentrated in large, metropolitan cities such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Milner (2012) describes urban emergent as large city areas, but smaller than metropolitan cities, that have some of the



same resource challenges as urban intensive. Urban characteristic is Milner's third category and the one into which the majority of schools in my study may fall. Urban characteristic schools are those that are not located in large cities but are experiencing challenges similar to those in the intensive and emergent settings. These challenges can include but are not limited to poverty, food insecurity, and increased English Language Learner populations.

As the principal of a high school physically situated in what is considered to be an "urban characteristic" location, serving what is considered an "urban" population of students, I am growing increasingly aware of the challenges that come along with being an urban school principal. As Lee (2005) notes, contextual challenges of urban schools include

Population density, Structural density, High concentration of people of color, High concentration of recent immigrants, High rates of reported crimes, Per capita higher rates of poverty, Complex transportation patterns, High concentration of airborne pollutants, Strong cultural stimulation, Diversity in property values, Inequities in the educational system, Large, complex educational systems, Inequities in the legal system, Lack of community connectedness, Cultural heterogeneity, and Inequities in access to health care. (p. 185)

Leading a school, regardless of the setting, physical location, or student population, is challenging for principals. Leading an urban school, however, comes with an added layer of challenges as principals have to address the many issues and characteristics that classify an urban school. In fact, the success of school leaders, particularly urban school principals, can often be attributed to how well they establish relationships with staff and the community, execute a clear and intentional vision for

teaching and learning, manage the constant crises within the building, and provide effective learning opportunities for a diverse student population (Petrides, Jimes, & Karaglan, 2014). In a report created by Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) and the Stupski Foundation, key findings from the existing literature on educational leadership were examined to identify effective leadership practices that positively impact students of color and poverty. Through their study, they argue that regardless of a principal's race, those who are proactive in addressing poverty and racism are more likely to develop school environments with high expectations, yielding high levels of student achievement (McIver et al., 2009).

While there exists a plethora of challenges that principals face from district office policies and from within their own buildings, there are also challenges that exist outside of the school and district walls and into their communities. Since school desegregation began in earnest in the 1960s, social inequalities have played a role in the disproportionately negative educational experiences for poor and minority students in urban settings. Ladson-Billings (2006) reminds us that

no nation can enslave a race of people for hundreds of years, set them free bedraggled and penniless, pit them, without assistance in a hostile environment, against privileged victimizers, and then reasonably expect the gap between the heirs of the two groups to narrow. Lines begun parallel and left alone, can never touch. (p. 8)

As educational leaders, principals are charged with finding meaningful ways of intervening in the lives of our most marginalized students in order to ensure a more equitable education experience. Through his research, Khalifa (2012) concluded that high

visibility within the community and advocacy of community-based causes by a school's principal can result in an increase in trust, credibility, and rapport within the neighborhood and school community. While this proves to be a challenge for many principals, this type of cultural leadership is paramount, particularly in urban school settings, when we consider the struggles that many of our minority and impoverished students face outside of the school walls. Students in urban neighborhoods are often faced with limited access to healthcare, high crime environments, and inadequate housing, food, and transportation, making it difficult for them to fully participate in their education. However, when trust and relationships are developed between school leadership and the community, there exists an increase in parental and community engagement that provides support as schools attempt to mitigate these external factors. Additionally, Khalifa (2012) found that increased parental and community engagement resulted in "successful school leadership and positive social and academic outcomes for students" (p. 16).

### **Summary**

We know that there are plenty of challenges that principals face in their schools on a daily basis, ranging from the stresses of testing accountability to balancing countless stakeholder expectations. However, we may sometimes forget that there are additional factors outside of the school walls that are major challenges for principals as well. These factors include the presence of poverty and social injustice in our country, particularly in our urban schools. While these can be seen as "outside," non-academic issues, their

effects permeate school hallways on a daily basis. No matter the origins of these challenges, principals must address them through their leadership.

### **Small School Settings**

This third section of my literature review considers the nature of small school settings, principals' experiences in small school settings, and the effectiveness of small school principals. Because EMCHSs are within the "small schools" family, gaining an understanding of the principalship in these particular settings should shine light on some possible challenges and experiences that principals navigate in the EMCHS setting. Since considerable variation exists among the different types of small schools, the literature I discuss in this section represents only a sampling of the principal experiences in these settings.

### **Function and Definition of Small Schools**

Merchant (2011) argues that large comprehensive schools, which serve the majority of the nation's school aged children in both urban and suburban areas, are under attack by not only businesses and politicians, but community members, parents, and educators as well. These attacks, fueled by the failing schools' rhetoric and motivated by failed school reform efforts, have sparked the growth of the small school movement. In fact, in the early 2000s many school districts across United States began using small school development as a central strategy for improving high schools and changing the status quo around high school reform (Allen & Steinberg, 2004; Kahne, Sporte, De La Torre, & Easton, 2008; Peters, 2011). This small school development was supported in large part by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which provided over \$3.5 billion to

schools across the country in an effort to improve high schools by way of smaller innovative schools (Kahne et al., 2008). One study reported that small school high school settings in New York significantly increased graduation rates for a large number of marginalized and disadvantaged students, including students in special education and English language learners' subgroups (Bloom & Unterman, 2013). This study also reported that principals strongly believed that high quality teaching staffs and their ability to establish personal relationships with students contributed to the successes of their schools (Bloom & Unterman, 2013). These principals also believe "that these attributes derive from their schools' small organizational structures and from their committed, knowledgeable, hardworking, and adaptable teachers" (Bloom & Unterman, 2013, p. 5). With hopes to address academic and social challenges, large, underperforming comprehensive schools have been converted into multiple smaller schools with academic freedoms (Allen & Steinberg, 2004; Khane, 2008; Peters, 2011; Smerdon & Cohen, 2009).

While small school settings have grown popular most recently as a school reform model, the history of these settings can be dated back to the 1960s and 1970s with the creation of school-within-a-school models, magnet schools, and academic academy trends (Merchant, 2011). Several different models of small school settings currently exist and operate in our nation's educational systems, and for the vast majority of them, embody characteristics such as autonomy, instructional independence, and of course small student bodies. Small schools have independent budgets and provide students with

a more personalized and intimate school experience, one that is geared toward increasing the academic performance of all students (Peters, 2011).

In many cases, small schools are established by reconstituting a larger comprehensive school, and encompass a new design, structure, staff, and administration. Small high schools can differ in size, but typically average 400 students (Merchant, 2011). Allen and Steinberg (2004) discuss two different approaches for creating small schools, the “incremental” (or “conversion”) and “big bang” (or “start-up”) approaches. In the incremental approach, several new and independent small schools are established inside of a comprehensive school with the intention of supplanting the comprehensive school once each grade level in the small schools are at capacity. This approach is used when district leaders prefer to transform large high schools slowly, over a period of years. In the big bang approach, large comprehensive schools are abruptly closed, and reopened with multiple smaller schools either within the same building or at various off-site locations. One study found that, while both strategies proved to possess the potential to help generate successful student outcomes, “start-up schools in their first several years showed positive results in terms of attendance and some indication of student achievement gains, whereas these outcomes did not emerge for conversion schools during the timeframe of the study” (Shear et al., 2008, p. 1987). Regardless of the approach, incremental or big bang, district leaders generally decide to transform comprehensive schools into small schools as an intervention meant to address consistent school failure (Allen & Steinberg, 2004; Shear et al., 2008).

### **Conditions and Characteristics of Small School Settings (Components)**

Due to the level of instructional and structural autonomy that leaders of small schools are afforded, these school settings typically have varying characteristics and conditions compared to their comprehensive counterparts. Allen and Steinberg (2004) inform us that leaders of small school settings have “an opportunity to fundamentally rethink such key areas as administrative structures, staff roles, student/teacher relationships, course sequences, subject matter, the use of time, community partnerships, and parent engagement” (p. 1). While small schools provide an opportunity for autonomy for leaders, comprehensive schools are bound to the district constraints surrounding each of these areas.

One of the key features of small school settings is their ability to focus on fostering strong and positive staff and student relationships. School districts’ decisions to restructure comprehensive schools into small school settings are often an effort to provide deeper personalized learning and relationship building opportunities within school communities that focus on developing students’ academic, social, and emotional needs (Peters, 2011). Current literature suggests that academic performance outcomes are positively affected when school staff develop strong relationships with their students. Merchant (2011) states that “It is through these relationships teachers are able to develop a better understanding of individual student needs, career goals, and strengths. This dynamic in turn helps teachers to better prepare for meeting individual academic needs in the classroom” (p. 29). He then goes on to add that students in small school settings tend

to benefit from more intimate and personalized learning environments than their counterparts in comprehensive schools (Merchant, 2011).

School identity is another component related to small school settings. Many small schools, regardless of their type, establish themes to express their identity to their staff, students, and community. For instance, within one district, there could exist STEM, Arts, Leadership, College Preparatory, Military, and Industrial based programs. These themes allow small schools to differentiate themselves from other schools, and help families make informed decisions when seeking out a “good fit” for their children (Levine, 2010).

### **Challenges of Small School Settings**

While the literature on small school settings provides a litany of examples of small schools that are considered successful, the literature also describes examples of small schools that have failed to meet the academic needs of students (Stevens, 2008). While reasons for small school failure vary, the literature does point out some specific challenges that small school settings face. For instance, inadequate funding can pose a challenge for small school settings. Researchers reported that principals at 25 of the highest performing small setting high schools in New York strongly believed that financial instability was their largest challenge in running a small school high school (Bloom & Unterman, 2013). While national funding sources and grants from organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are known for financially supporting the small school reform efforts, this is not the case for every small school. Many small schools do not receive such grant support and have to rely on the financial support from their district or local board of education. In a case study that examined the



experiences and outlooks of a novice school principal as she established a new small school, Peters (2011) discusses the challenges associated with reshaping a school's culture when converting an existing failing school into a new small school. Also, because of a limited staffing, leaders in a small school will often wear a multitude of hats and must "possess proficiency in instructional leadership, be politically savvy, manage partnerships and other constituents, and maintain the fidelity of the small school paradigm" (Peters, 2011, p. 92).

### **The Principalship in Small School Settings**

Allen and Steinberg (2004) argue that the successes of small school settings are attributed to this higher level of autonomy and flexibility that principals possess in these settings. They go on to add that this autonomy "allow(s) the people closest to the students—school leaders, faculty, parents, other students—to make school-level decisions about how to organize resources to best meet young people's learning needs" (Allen & Steinberg, 2004, p. 2). While autonomy is generally something that most educational leaders would covet, exercising this autonomy and using it to positively impact students while still remaining accountable to state and district standards and expectations has the potential to further complicate the role of small school principals. However, despite the complexity that increased autonomy can create for principals, Merchant (2011) suggests that a small school principal's ability to still operate within state and district confines is vital.

The literature on educational leadership suggests that there are several characteristics that are common across effective school principals, regardless of the

school settings in which they serve. However, just as the principalship role varies from school to school, research also suggests that principals need to possess certain skills and characteristics depending on the conditions and components of the school setting. The literature on small school settings suggests that principals must be instructionally focused, collaborative, self-confident, distributive, flexible, knowledgeable of the reform model, and visionaries (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009; Haynes, 2011; Ishimaru, 2013; Stevens, 2008).

The small school literature supports the idea that the most impactful characteristic needed for a small school leader to be successful is simply having a strong knowledge base and support for the small school reform model (Haynes, 2011). According to Haynes (2011), “in order for leaders to lead they must understand how to successfully direct the teachers and stakeholders on its [small school model] implementation” (p. 20). With small schools often being organized by themes and/or focuses and attracting students of varied demographics, small school principals must be able to lead their staff in providing a quality educational experience for a diverse student population. Haynes (2011) argues that small school principals should be able to “help teachers maximize their instructional strategies to promote a learning environment that provides equitable learning for all students” (p. 21). While this is also a need for comprehensive school principals, small school principals must be able to find ways to increase their staff’s capacity to meet the different needs of their students. As I noted previously in this literature review, culturally responsive leadership provides means for small school

principals to support and promote diversity among their institutions' students (Khalifa et al., 2016).

In research on the characteristics of successful small high schools in Chicago, Stevens (2008) found that “principals were crucial catalysts in helping teacher communities engage in structured and sustained collective work on instructional improvement” (p. 5). Additionally, Ishimaru (2013) contended that small school principals engage in shared leadership with traditionally marginalized groups of parents by “building deep relationships, developing capacity in the form of ‘empowered’ parents, and creating opportunities for parent leadership in the new schools” (p. 19). The ability for principals to be collaborative is another leadership characteristic that is important for principals in any setting to possess. However, because small school settings have smaller staffs with the same responsibilities as comprehensive schools, the need for a collaborative principal is heightened. Because there are fewer people on staff to “run” a school, it is vital that principals encourage and provide staff opportunities to engage in program planning and mission and vision development, as these are essential in laying a foundation for the establishment of new small school models (Haynes, 2011). With the demands and increased workloads that are prevalent in small school settings, principals need to also be well versed in distributive leadership, allowing staff to participate in decision-making and school management (Stevens, 2008).

Cruzeiro and Boone (2009) discussed several characteristics that superintendents preferred in small school principals. Their study found that superintendents preferred principal candidates who had demonstrated leadership potential, could motivate and hold

staff accountable for school improvement, and possessed self-confidence. Additional superintendent preferences for small school principal candidate characteristics included collaborative leadership skills, strong communication skills, the ability to competently multitask, experienced with accountability systems such as NCLB, and having prior leadership experience (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009). Hiring superintendents also valued prospective small school principals' ability to "fit into the political and social context of the local community" (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009, p. 7).

### **Effectiveness of Small School Principals**

Studies of the effectiveness of small school settings is a growing body of literature that suggests that this model yields higher student performance, fewer dropouts, more graduates, safer environments, higher attendance, and more positive attitudes toward and associated with school than their larger comprehensive counterparts (Allen & Steinberg, 2004; Peters, 2011; Schrimsher, 2011; Shiller, 2011; Stiefel et al., 2015). Effective leadership is often the cause for such success. Manríquez (2012), for instance, argued that "personalization" was the critical element found within the success of small school settings. The principal in this study who maintained success in this small school environment did so by demonstrating high expectations of behaviors and achievement for all students, required all students to take college classes while in high school (not just the high achieving students), and created a bridge between the school and its parents which fostered a culture of shared and collaborative leadership (Manríquez, 2012). Through this research we are able to connect CRL practices to the successful turnaround of a predominantly Latino small school high school.

In their study of several effective small schools in Chicago, Stevens (2008) identified “deep principal leadership” as one of the contributing factors in the schools’ success. Several of these best practices implemented by small school principals include ensuring personalized instruction and social supports for students, promoting strong relationships between staff and students, establishing strong and effective staff professional learning communities, maintaining a focus on improving instruction, providing adequate time for staff to collaboratively plan and fine-tune each other’s lessons, and providing meaningful professional development opportunities for staff (Stevens, 2008).

### **Summary**

Current literature informs us that the small schools model has become a significant part of this nation’s school reform efforts. From schools-within-a-school to magnet and charter schools with specific themes and focuses, these settings have been put in place to improve the academic experience and performance of the students they serve. While small school settings serve a wide range of students, research suggests that this model generally produces positive outcomes for marginalized student populations. Relationship building and personalized learning experiences, which are made more manageable with small school and class sizes, are pillars of the small school setting. The principalship in small school settings is unique in that there is an increased level of autonomy. At the same time, small school principals must be capable of managing several tasks at once since they are usually the lone administrator. Research suggests that

successful principals in these settings need to be good communicators, distribute leadership, and develop inclusive programs.

### **Early/Middle College High School Model**

In this section, I provide background on a specific type of small school, the early and middle college high school. I define the EMCHS and its characteristics and components, discuss the relationship between early and middle college high school models, describe the history and purpose of EMCHS, and examine research regarding the effectiveness of these schools in terms of improving student outcomes. Additionally, I discuss the local and national status of the EMCHS model. Finally, I conclude this section with a discussion of the limited literature available that speaks specifically to the principalship of EMCHS settings. Understanding the background context of the EMCHS model is a necessary prerequisite when studying the principalship in this setting.

### **The Early and Middle College High School Model**

In this section, I define what early college high schools are as well as how they are related to middle college high schools and early/middle college high schools. Through these definitions, I highlight the unique and essential characteristics that surround this model and provide a description of the student populations which early/middle college high schools were designed to serve.

**Early college high schools.** The early college high school model is a school reform model that is focused on preparing students for college and providing them with college experiences, including up to 60 hours of transferable course credit while still in high school. These schools merge aspects of both high school and college in efforts to

establish learning environments focused on graduating students from high school with the knowledge, skills, and tools needed to be successful in college (Edmunds, 2012). While these school programs may vary in their structure and organization, many schools are physically situated on college campuses and take advantage of dual enrollment programming. Dual enrollment courses are college courses taught by college professors that high school students can take and receive credit towards both their high school diploma and a Bachelor's or Associate's degree. Students are able to take these college courses at no cost to them or their parents. Students in early college high schools often start taking college classes as early as ninth grade in self-contained classes. Self-contained classes are college classes taught by college professors that are occupied only by high school students. After their ninth-grade year, however, early college high school students often begin to take classes with other traditional college students. An additional factor that makes early colleges unique is that they generally serve fewer than 100 students per grade level, keeping student class sizes low. In addition, students in early colleges are allowed to stay for a fifth year of high school to complete college courses towards an Associate's degree (Born, 2006; DiMaria, 2013; Edmunds et al., 2013; Le & Frankfort, 2011; Rich, 2011; Zalaznick, 2015).

In many early college high school programs, getting students adequately prepared for college is the driving force behind the majority of their decisions. Early colleges must determine what high school courses students will take, what student supports to provide, and the type of instruction that is delivered by teachers. These are all examples of school decisions that are influenced by an early college high school's mission to prepare their

students for college. Although early college high school programs can vary from school to school and district to district, they each share five common essential components that help define the early college high school model. Researchers describe these core components as (a) maintaining student populations that are underrepresented in colleges and universities, (b) having an established partnership between the school district and an institution of high learning, (c) course programming that allows students to receive a high school diploma and up to two years of college credit, (d) a commitment to providing academic and social support through intentional programming, and (e) the advocacy of policies that support early college initiatives (Berger, Adelman, & Cole, 2010; Edmunds, 2012).

**Middle college high schools.** The Middle College National Consortium offered the following as a description of middle college high schools:

Middle College High Schools are secondary schools, authorized to grant diplomas in their own name, located on college campuses across the nation. The Middle Colleges are small, with usually 100 or fewer students per grade level and they provide a rigorous academic curriculum within a supportive and nurturing environment to a student population that has been historically under-served and underrepresented in colleges. While at the Middle College, students have the opportunity to take some college classes at no cost to themselves. (Middle College National Consortium, 2017)

This definition of middle college high schools is very similar to how early colleges are described. Throughout the literature on the early/middle college high school model, I noticed the terms early college, middle college, and early/middle college being used interchangeably. In terms of their definitions, purposes, and targeted student populations, the literature is consistent in describing them as identical program models. In fact, the



Middle College National Consortium attests that early college high schools possess all of the same characteristics of a middle college high school.

The minor difference between middle and early college high schools can be found in their history, as the early college high school model evolved out of the middle college high school model created in the 1970s. While both program models provide students with opportunities to gain college credits, the newer early college high school model is widely known for enabling students to receive both a high school diploma and an Associate's degree within 4-5 years (Cunningham & Wagonlander, 2000; Middle College National Consortium, 2017). Today's middle colleges offer students the same opportunities as their peers in early colleges, however, the original purpose for the development of the middle college setting was to address high dropout rates (Lieberman, 1985). Because of this history, early and middle colleges have different entry points for students. Early colleges traditionally accept students only in their freshman year to allow for enough time to complete both the high school diploma and the college degree. Middle colleges, on the other hand, traditionally accept students beyond their freshman year of high school to provide an opportunity to attain college course credit, and to support students who may be at risk of dropping out of high school.

**Early/Middle college high schools.** Middle colleges are designed to serve the same disadvantaged student populations that early colleges serve. Additionally, middle colleges establish school programming that allow students to earn both high school and college credits the same way early colleges do. They are essentially the same.

Given the close relationship between early and middle college high schools, Edmunds et al. (2012) use the term “early/middle college high schools.” They define an early/middle college high school as a school “designed to accelerate the academic progress of students while minimizing or even eliminating the barriers between high school and college” (p. 2). Because both school models are so similar, the titles “middle” and “early” are often used interchangeably or in conjunction as “early/middle.” The term “early/middle college high school” is the most commonly used term today. Throughout this research study, I use the language “early/middle college high school” or “EMCHS” to refer to this high school model in an effort to limit confusion for readers.

Regardless of the title (early, middle, or early/middle), this high school model was designed specifically for students who belong to groups that have historically faced challenges in entering college. This population includes students who are low income, the first in their family to go to college, or members of minority groups that are underrepresented in college (Edmunds, 2012). Additionally, other “at-risk” factors include students who are first-generation Americans, English as a second language learners, experiencing social and/or behavioral issues, and/or living in non-traditional home environments. Generally speaking, both early and middle college high school settings cater to students who may lack intrinsic motivation to achieve academically and who come from homes where they are the first to graduate from college, or even high school. The settings for EMCHS can be found in both rural and urban communities, including places where problems of violence, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and high dropout rates are the rule rather than the exception (Born, 2006).

**Rationale/Purpose for Early/Middle College High Schools**

When we consider which students are graduating high school and attending and achieving success in college, it is clear that our poor, minoritized students are drastically underrepresented. In a longitudinal study of high school freshmen across the country from 1988 to 2000, only 65% of socioeconomically disadvantaged students graduated from high school, only 45% enrolled in college, and only 11% earned a college degree. In contrast, their middle- and upper-class peers were five times more likely to attain a college degree (Cooper, 2011).

Unfortunately for students of color who live in poverty, these numbers have not improved much since 2000, and have even seen a decline in some areas. In the 2014-2015 school year, the nation's average high school graduation rate was 83%, and White students graduated at a rate of 88%, well above the national average. Unfortunately, students of color did not experience the same success. American Indian students' graduation rate was 72%, African American students' graduation rate was 75%, and Hispanic students graduated at a rate of 78% (McFarland et al., 2018). Also, in 2014-2015 African American first year students attending 4-year colleges/universities had a persistence rate of 69%, Hispanics had a rate of 79%, and American Indian students had a rate of 64%. These persistence rates were all significantly lower than the White students' persistence rate of 82% (McFarland et al., 2017).

Clagett and Barrett (2017) argue that "large discrepancies in educational attainment, employment rates, and income levels across certain populations make it clear that our economic growth and prosperity have not been shared equitably" (p. 2). A

growth in progressive high school models has played a major role in our nation's attempts to address our current racial divides and socioeconomic imbalances. State and organizational policymakers have launched a variety of high school reform initiatives, the most popular being the EMCHS model. As far as a purpose for their inception is concerned, "they exist to encourage at-risk youth to succeed through three major supports: visible peer models, that is, students enrolled at the colleges; small classes; and superior academic and support services" (Cunningham & Wagonlander, 2000, p. 41).

### **History of the Early/Middle College High School Model**

Early and middle college high schools are virtually identical entities; however, in order to understand the history of the EMCHS model we first must look back to the origin of the middle college high school model. The very first middle college high school was opened in 1973 at LaGuardia Community College in New York. The design for the middle college concept evolved from the work of Janet Lieberman, then a professor of psychology at LaGuardia Community College (Cunningham & Wagonlander, 2000). The philosophy behind the establishment of this school was based on Lieberman's belief that "fifteen-year-olds (the tenth-grade students) have more in common with twenty-year-olds than with twelve-year-olds and should be allowed to make their own educational choices" (Lieberman, 1985, p. 48).

This initiative was funded by the Carnegie Corporation and the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education. The intent behind this initiative was to address the academic issues universities in New York faced from underprepared students. Additionally, this model was the catalyst to decrease dropout rates at urban high schools,

and to attract and prepare more urban students for success in college (Lieberman, 1985). This model started with 125 sophomores, all of whom were identified by their previous schools as at risk of dropping out of high school, and added an additional 125 sophomores each year, serving at-risk students in grades 10-12. All student enrollment was voluntary with parental permission. While still operating as a public school, this model served as a new bridge for students between high school and college. At this middle college high school, staff was not regulated by all district policy and maintained some autonomy in curriculum selections and pacing. Students were provided with service-oriented and career educational experiences, along with a mandated internship in which all students spent a third of the school year working (Lieberman, 1985). Conceived in New York over 40 years ago, the middle college high school model has been replicated in major urban areas, smaller cities, and towns all across the country. The schools target students who have the potential to attend and be successful in college, but who are identified as at risk of dropping out of high school (DiMaria, 2013; Edmunds, 2012; Edmunds et al., 2013).

The latest variation of the middle college model was called the early college model. The early college model, as we know it today, exists because of funding support provided by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. With investments of over hundreds of millions of dollars, Parry, Field, and Supiano (2013) explain that the foundation is focused on influencing higher education in order to increase the number of students completing college and, by extension, reduce the nation's poverty rates. This foundation was responsible for creating the Early College High School Initiative in 2002 (Edmunds,

2012). The objective of this initiative was to establish 250 early/middle college high schools and enroll more than 100,000 students annually (Cooper, 2011). This initiative was financially supported by several other foundations and coordinated through Jobs for the Future, which is a national nonprofit organization that provides underserved students with educational and economic opportunities through programing that impacts college and career preparedness (Killough, 2009). Jobs for the Future seeks to support socioeconomically disadvantaged students through high school and college in order for them to obtain a successful career.

### **Effectiveness of Early/Middle College High School Initiative**

Just like in any other large-scale initiative, program evaluation of the EMCHS initiative is essential in order to justify its existence and continued growth. Since its inception, the EMCHS initiative has been evaluated through a focus on students' high school and college graduation rates, college credits earned in high school, college acceptance rates, and other academic achievement measures. The national data collected on EMCHS are encouraging and provide evidence that this model has been successful in increasing high school students' readiness for college. In 2006, for example, 80% of EMCHS students were accepted to 4-year colleges, 85% graduated from high school with at least 30 college credits, and over 57% graduated high school with an Associate's degree (Cooper, 2011). In 2008, 201 EMCHSs served over 42,000 students. Eighty-nine percent of the graduates that year enrolled in 2- or 4-year colleges right out of high school in comparison to 66% of high school graduates nationwide (Killough, 2009). By 2011, the average high school graduation rate for EMCHSs across the nation had risen to 93%

as compared to 76% for traditional high schools. Additionally, by this time, 93% of graduates earned at least some college credits and 56% earned two or more years of college credit (DiMaria, 2013). In 2015, a national study of over 280 EMCHSs serving 80,000 students found that 90% of EMCHS students graduated from high school compared to 78% nationally. Additionally, compared to only 10% of traditional high school students nationally, 94% of EMCHS students earned college credits while in high school. Thirty percent of these students earned both their high school diploma and an Associate's degree or college certificate. When considering college attrition rates, 86% of EMCHS students enter their second year of college compared to 72% of general population college students nationally (Clagett & Barrett, 2017).

Needless to say, the research on the EMCHS shows the effectiveness and positive student outcomes of this model. Due to this high school reform model, more students are graduating from high school, attending college, and earning Associate's degrees while still in high school. The academic trajectory that ECMHSs produce, especially for poor and minority students, has been instrumental in preparing them for success in college and the workforce.

### **Local and National Landscape**

**National.** One of the initial goals set forth by the EMCHS initiative and the foundations that support the initiative was to establish over 300 EMCHSs nationwide by 2020 (Killough, 2009). This goal is currently in reach, as the nation has over 280 EMCHSs in 31 states that serve over 80,000 students (Jobs for the Future, 2017). School districts in large cities all over the country have established EMCHS, growing rapidly in

cities such as New York, Cincinnati, Seattle, Washington, DC, Oakland, Milwaukee, Detroit, Charlotte, and Chicago (Bloom & Unterman, 2014). States with over ten EMCHSs include North Carolina, Washington, California, Texas, Georgia, Ohio, and New York; Utah and Massachusetts have six and five early colleges, respectively (Jobs for the Future, 2017).

As part of the rapid increase in EMCHS programs in states throughout our country, strong relationships have developed between institutions of higher education and public school districts. These newly forged relationships help both the public school systems and institutions of higher education work as partners as they realize their shared expectations for students. Now more than ever, the responsibility to provide students with the skills and opportunity to transition into and through a postsecondary education is shared between the public school systems and institutions of higher education (Zalaznick, 2015).

While EMCHS programs vary from state to state, most programs have online course flexibility allowing students who are not geographically close to these schools to participate and take additional courses in order to graduate sooner or fulfill personal academic interests. EMCHS programs across the nation have also started to establish specific foci and pathways. Computer, Career and Technical Education (CCTE) and Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) pathways are foci that have been adopted as part of these models in order to provide students with exposure and a high school curriculum in line with current career trends and interests. Student internships are also significant components of some of these programs. They provide students with



hands-on experiences in the workforce while they are still taking high school and college courses.

Since these early college programs have grown increasingly popular, the demand often tends to be greater than the number of students who can be served. From numerous conversations that I have had with EMCHS principals from across the state of North Carolina, I have learned that, in some districts, the student application and selection process is facilitated through a centralized lottery process. In other districts, more complex selection processes (including applications, interviews, writing samples, letters of recommendations, etc.) may be utilized. In fact, in many districts, students' writing samples are required in order for students to demonstrate their potential to write on the college level.

**North Carolina.** While the majority of states have at least one EMCHS, North Carolina leads all states with over 73 early/middle college high schools (Jobs for the Future, 2017). This rapid growth started in 2004 when North Carolina implemented a statewide early college initiative in order to provide students with the education needed to be successful in a changing economy (Le & Frankfort, 2011). To support the state's efforts, the North Carolina New Schools Project was developed. The North Carolina New Schools Project initiated, funded, and supported innovative high schools in North Carolina, including EMCHS. To provide schools with uniformity across proven practices, the New Schools Project established six design principles that they used when creating new EMCHSs (Le & Frankfort, 2011). These design principles were accepted as non-negotiables among early/middle college high schools: Ready for College, Powerful

Teaching and Learning, Personalization, Redefine Professionalism, Leadership, and Purposeful Design. In addition to the design principles for newly created EMCHSs, the North Carolina New Schools Project also established a set of instructional strategies that schools would implement in order to give all students access to complex information. These strategies included Collaborative Group Work, Writing to Learn, Literacy Groups, Questioning, Classroom Talk, and Scaffolding (Le & Frankfort, 2011). When considering the effectiveness of the North Carolina New Schools Project and EMCHS models in the state, significant progress has been made in establishing environments where students are prepared for college and the workforce when they graduate from high school (Edmunds, 2012).

In April of 2016, the North Carolina New Schools Project announced its closing. Despite receiving several million-dollar grants, financial support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and federal grants, the North Carolina New Schools Project went bankrupt with debts exceeding \$1.5 million. The financial failure of this program was attributed to recent expansions that the program could not sustain (Neff, 2017). With the closure of the primary support for the EMCHS in North Carolina, the future of this innovative model in North Carolina is unclear.

### **Research on the EMCHS Principalship**

Because EMCHS settings are relatively new school reform models, becoming most popular in the early 2000s, the research on these school settings has been limited. The majority of the research on EMCHS examine the history and/or school characteristic, or either the academic performances of these schools which has been mostly positive.

Little research has been conducted on the aspects of leadership within the EMCHS model; therefore, there exists a gap in the literature, which was a part of my motivation to conduct this particular study. Throughout my search of the related literature on the EMCHS setting, I came across a small sampling of research studies related to the unique principalship of EMCHSs. This section serves as a review of that sampling of literature, to which I plan to add my own study's findings.

In one of the few studies specifically on the principalship in early/middle college high schools, Rich (2011) discusses characteristics of effective EMCHS principals. While other principal characteristics previously mentioned throughout the existing research literature are important to possess for both traditional and non-traditional school principals, Rich (2011) argues that EMCHSs have different types of students and instructional focal points as compared to traditional schools. Therefore, ECMHSs need principals with unique characteristics. In fact, Rich (2011) informs us that principals in the first EMCHSs were required to provide cooperative learning and team-teaching experiences, be trained and experienced in counseling, and possess a risk-taking attitude. Participants in his study identified advocating for good teaching, empowering others, a commitment to the early/middle college high school model, and being relationship-driven as leadership characteristics of effective EMCHS principals (Rich, 2011). Because of the specific needs of the student populations and small staff that afford limited human resource help, EMCHS principals need to encompass and embrace these characteristics in order to be successful in their settings. Understanding the characteristics EMCHS

principals need to possess to be successful can be helpful in my attempt to understand the unique challenges of EMCHS principals.

Hammonds (2016) conducted a qualitative study that used a multisite case study of three North Carolina EMCHS principals to examine the principal practices utilized to promote the success of marginalized student groups. These groups included first-generation, minority, and low-income students. In her study, Hammonds (2016) argued that with the increasing diversity in our nation's schools, we will need principals who "demonstrate democratic, socially just, culturally responsive leadership"—principal practices her study found to be essential for effectiveness in EMCHSs (p. 23). Within the findings of her study, Hammonds (2016) highlighted examples of culturally responsive leadership when principals "challenged teacher's deficit thinking about student's behavior and achievement"; demonstrated an "ethic of care and love toward their students and the communities where they served"; and, "fired and dismissed teachers that did not value the student's or the school's purpose and mission" (p. 23). All of these practices increased principals' credibility among parents and students (Hammonds, 2016). Additionally, Hammonds (2016) found that EMCHS principals made it evident that they cared about, loved, and respected their students. They maintained high expectations and fostered a familial school culture.

Another study designed to uncover leadership practices of highly effective EMCHS principals used a case study of five acting EMCHS principals (Hill, 2017). For this particular study, highly effective was defined as a school performance grade of an A and a 95% or higher graduation rate (Hill, 2017). The study found that these highly

effective EMCHS principals perceived themselves to be “collaborative, trusting, supportive, and highly engaged with the students in their schools” (Hill, 2017, p. 118). Colleagues of these principals described them as “transparent, supportive, caring, trusting, data-driven, empowering, visionary, and collaborative” (Hill, 2017, p. 118). Principal participants in this study pursued a student-centered focus by intentionally fostering positive relationships between students and all other stakeholder groups, maintaining a high level of visibility in the classrooms to engage with students, and working directly with student support services (Hill, 2017). Whether intentionally or unintentionally, each of the EMCHS principals also demonstrated characteristics of servant leadership by exhibiting empowering their staffs and engaging in shared decision-making (Hill, 2017). The third and final theme of the Hill (2017) study was the Unicorn Effect. EMCHS principals communicated a level of concern and frustration with the isolation that came with being an EMCHS principal, as these principals are almost always the only administrator in the building and often the only EMCHS principal in the district.

### **Summary**

Early/middle college high school settings represent innovative school reform models. They are designed to positively impact the educational and social outcomes for marginalized groups of students. This is a much-needed reform model due to the large educational disparities between our poor students of color and their White, middle class peers. The success that these schools experience has caused a significant increase in the establishment of EMCHSs across the nation. Even though it is limited, the current body of literature on the EMCHS principalship helps to shed a small light on the conditions

and experiences of principals in these settings. We know that while they share many challenges and experiences of their peers who lead traditional high schools, EMCHS principals have many experiences and challenges. They also require skills and approaches that are unique to their size, settings, and climates. With the increase in the popularity of the EMCHS model, it is important for us to have a much deeper understanding of the principalship associated with this setting.

### **Chapter Summary**

There is a growing body of literature that focuses on the early/middle college high setting. From this literature, we know that EMCHSs generally experience high levels of success in meeting the academic needs of marginalized groups of students, providing them college experiences and opportunities that they may not have otherwise had. While the literature on the EMCHS setting is emerging, there is limited literature that speaks directly to the principalship experiences associated with this setting. Therefore, understanding the background context of the EMCHS model is a necessary prerequisite when analyzing the EMCHS principalship, the challenges and experiences their leaders navigate, and their connection to culturally responsive leadership. Existing scholarship regarding the principalship in general, culturally responsive leadership, and small school high school settings helps to provide supplementary insight into the understudied role of the EMCHS principal. In the following chapter, I discuss the methods I used to conduct my study on the EMCHS principalship. I also provide a description of my data review and analysis process.

### **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The goal of my research was to uncover the unique experiences and challenges faced by principals of early/middle college high schools (EMCHSs), and to gain an understanding of how they navigate these experiences and challenges. I also sought to understand how these principals demonstrate culturally responsive leadership in these settings. I am hopeful that the findings of this study will help to inform district leaders as they recruit and support principals in these settings. I also hope my study can serve as an onboarding tool for novice and potential EMCHS principals. Stories and experiences from my study's participants can provide new early/middle college high school principals with invaluable insight into the position and, thus, assist them in successfully navigating the EMCHS terrain.

In the previous two chapters I introduced my study and presented a review of related research literature regarding the principalship and the EMCHS setting. In this chapter, I describe in detail the qualitative research approach I took in this study. I used a qualitative approach because I wished to learn about and from principals' personal experiences and perceptions. I relied on interviews and observations to capture the unique experiences and challenges of EMCHS principals. In this chapter, I discuss my research approach and design. Additionally, I provide an overview of the processes I used to collect data (including the specific questions I asked the study participants during

interviews) and analyze that data. I conclude this methods chapter by considering issues of ethics and trustworthiness.

### **Research Approach and Tradition**

In order to identify the experiences and challenges faced by EMCHS principals and uncover how these experiences and challenges are navigated by principals, I decided to conduct a qualitative research study. I drew from Lichtman's (2012) definition to describe qualitative research:

Qualitative research is a general term. It is a way of knowing in which a researcher gathers, organizes, and interprets information obtained from humans using his or her eyes and ears as filters. It often involves in-depth interviews and/or observations of humans in natural, online, or social settings. (p. 7)

Lichtman's definition was useful as I made connections between my goals for this research study and a qualitative approach. Lichtman (2012) explains that qualitative research is most appropriate when researchers need answers to those "what and why" questions that cannot be addressed by analyzing statistical data. These types of questions are most appropriately addressed by in-depth interviews, surveys, and observations of participants in the natural setting (Lichtman, 2012).

There are varying traditions that fall under the qualitative umbrella. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) identify "basic qualitative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, narrative analysis, and qualitative case studies" as six of the most common traditions used in qualitative research studies (p. 23). Regardless of the research tradition, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue that "qualitative research is based on the belief that



knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon” (p. 23).

For my dissertation project, I employed a basic qualitative study to serve as my primary research approach. The basic qualitative study is the most common research approach in the fields of education, administration, social work, and counseling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While the many traditions of qualitative research are all centered around how individuals make sense of their lives and worlds, the main objective of the basic qualitative tradition is to construct knowledge through social interaction. This knowledge is gained through understanding how individuals make meaning of events and phenomena in which they are engaged (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data collection methods for a basic qualitative study include interviews, observations, and document analysis. The researcher’s analysis of data that he or she collects is centered around the identification of common themes and patterns through coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The basic qualitative research tradition, I believed, was the most appropriate for this study considering that my research focused on the personal perceptions and experiences of the research participants.

To conduct this study, I interviewed 11 acting and former principals of EMCHSs. Once the 11 first-round interviews were completed, I conducted follow-up interviews with three participants who (in their responses to questions during the initial round of interviews) demonstrated either culturally responsive leadership as a priority, an ability to overcome challenges of EMCHS settings, and/or a clear and experienced perspective between traditional and EMCHS settings for principals. Finally, I conducted observations

of a typical workday with the three participants I interviewed a second time. These observations lasted approximately 3-4 hours each. I created and used a semi-structured interview guide for all participants in both interview sessions and I used an observation protocol for the participant observations. I hired a professional transcriptionist to transcribe all the interviews after each round. I coded the transcribed interviews and observation notes to surface prevailing themes that reflected the common behaviors, challenges, and experiences of the principalship in the EMCHS setting.

### **Participant Selection**

Each of the 11 participants in this study was either a currently acting or former principal of an EMCHS. Efron and Ravid (2013) provide a general description of the participants of a research study as “people who affect or are affected by the issue under investigation” (p. 61). They then go on to inform us that qualitative research, “does not have a formulated set of rules about the size of the sample or how its selected. It is not uncommon to have a sample size of one to four individuals who have experience and in-depth knowledge about the topic being investigated” (p. 62). It is obvious that current and former EMCHS principals would have the most knowledge and be most affected by the “issue under investigation,” which is the principalship in the EMCHS setting.

All participants in this study were required to be active principals. To participate in the study, principals had to either be currently serving as an EMCHS principal (no requirement on years of experience), or had previously served as an EMCHS principal for at least one school year. In the selection process, I also intentionally sought out some participants who had served in the principal role in both EMCHS settings and traditional

school settings. My rationale for selecting principals with both experiences is that these individuals would have a broader perspective of the principalship, which would assist them in identifying experiences that are unique to the EMCHS settings.

Since North Carolina is one of the leading states in the country in the establishment of the EMCHSs, I selected all 11 study participants from within this state. More specifically, for accessibility purposes, participants came from Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) in the central part of North Carolina. I used personal networking resources, resources created in compliance with the UNCG-IRB department, and resources provided by NCDPI to identify and solicit the participants for the study. I took into consideration the gender, race, years of school administrative experience, and employing district of each participant to ensure that I generated a diverse group of study participants. For this study, I chose a *volunteer* and *convenience* sample (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Since there are over 30 EMCHSs in the central part of North Carolina, I selected the participants based on their willingness and availability to participate in the study. Although I used a volunteer and convenience sample, I still maintained a diverse group of participants by inviting them to participate one-by-one instead of in a huge listserv email. Inviting principals to participate one-by-one allowed me to intentionally seek out any demographic that was not present to ensure a diverse sample. Participant selection was also determined by the willingness of each LEA in central North Carolina to allow their principals to participate in the study. Proximity was not an issue, as I was willing to travel throughout central North Carolina to meet with participants.

Since I am already connected to the social context of my study as a principal of an EMCHS, I drew upon my personal experiences as a principal in this setting and contributed these experiences to my research. To do this, I had a professional colleague interview me, using the same interview protocol as the other study participants. By serving as a participant in my own study, I ensured that my current experiences and challenges as a principal of an EMCHS were represented. At the time of my interview I had only 1.5 years of experience as an EMCHS principal. Because of my positionality, I was also able to include insight from the point of view of a novice or inexperienced EMCHS principal. This perspective, I believed, was useful in Chapters IV and V during the discussion of practical strategies and action steps that leaders use to navigate the conditions and experiences of the principalship in the EMCHS setting, along with how culturally responsive leadership is understood and operationalized.

At the conclusion of the participant selection process, the participant sampling remained diverse by race, gender, experience, and LEA. Of the 11 participants (including myself) in my sample for the first round of interviews, six were male and five were female. Three of the 11 participants were African American, and eight were White. Four had two or fewer full years of principal experience, two had 3-5 years of principal experience, and five had 6 or more years of principal experience. Of the 11 participants, six had only EMCHS principal experience and five had both EMCHS and traditional school principal experience. Seven of the 11 participants were currently acting EMCHS principals, and four were current traditional school principals with EMCHS principal experience. This information is charted in Table 1. In the second round of interviews and

the observations, two of the three selected participants were female, and one of the three participants was African American. Each of the three participants came from different LEAs and had varying years and types of principal experiences. Again, each of the three second-round interview and observation participants were selected because of their strong demonstration of knowledge of the EMCHS principalship and/or culturally relevant leadership.

Table 1

## Participant Demographics

<b>Participant Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Total Years of Principals Experience</b>	<b>Years of EMCHS Principal Experience</b>	<b>Experience</b>	<b>Current Principal Position</b>
<b>Jason</b>	Male	B	1.5	1.5	EMCHS Only	EMCHS
<b>Ashlee</b>	Female	W	6.5	6.5	EMCHS Only	EMCHS
<b>Kimberly</b>	Female	W	2.5	2.5	EMCHS Only	EMCHS
<b>Kristyn</b>	Female	B	2.5	2.5	EMCHS Only	EMCHS
<b>Nichelle</b>	Female	W	0.5	0.5	EMCHS Only	EMCHS
<b>Evette</b>	Female	W	3.0	3.0	EMCHS Only	EMCHS
<b>Jacob</b>	Male	W	13.0	2.0	Both	Traditional
<b>Daniel</b>	Male	W	4.0	2.0	Both	Traditional
<b>Levi</b>	Male	W	7.0	1.0	Both	EMCHS
<b>Damon</b>	Male	W	13.0	2.0	Both	Traditional
<b>Joseph</b>	Male	B	6.0	3.0	Both	Traditional

### **Data Collection**

In order to gain an understanding of the experiences and challenges of EMCHS principals, how they overcome challenges, and how they understand and exhibit culturally responsive leadership, I needed to learn from the experiences of several former and acting EMCHS principals. To collect the data, I conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews and three observations. Together, I used these data collection methods to determine answers to the following questions:

- What are the challenges and experiences of early/middle college high school principals?
- How do early/middle college high school principals navigate these challenges and experiences?
- How do current and former early/middle college high school principals understand the meaning of culturally responsive leadership and how does it influence their practice?

### **Interviews**

To start the data collection process, I conducted an initial round of semi-structured interviews with each of the 11 participants. Lichtman (2012) defines semi-structured interviews as interviews that are facilitated from a “general set of questions and format that you follow and use with all participants” (p. 191). Using the semi-structured interview process versus a structured process allowed me (as the interviewer) the flexibility to vary the questions as needed to fit the situational demands of the interview (Lichtman, 2012). After the initial round of interviews, I selected three

participants (from the original 11) with whom to conduct a second semi-structured interview to go into greater detail regarding their perceptions and experiences regarding the principalship in ECMHSs.

In both rounds of interviews, I asked participants broad and open-ended questions to get them to speak as much as possible about their experiences as a principal in their current and (where applicable) former settings. Lichtman (2012) describes five types of interview questions: Grand tour, concrete examples, comparison or contrast, new elements, and closing. Grand tour questions are very general. They are designed to encourage participants to talk at length about themselves or a series of events. Concrete example questions provide participants with the opportunity to provide relevant and specific accounts of their experience. Comparison questions challenge participants to give meaning to current situations and experiences by reflecting on previous experiences; these questions allow them to draw comparisons between the past and present. New element questions can serve as transitions to lead participants away from redundant topics that they may repeat. Using a semi-structured interview process afforded me the flexibility to make adjustments with new element questions, since they are not bound to the rigidity of a structured interview guide. Finally, closing questions allow the participant to share anything that they feel is relevant to the topics covered. This is where they can expand a previous point or share information about a topic that was not discussed but related to the overall purpose of the interview (Lichtman, 2012). In order to develop a strong and comprehensive interview guide, I included each of these types of questions in the guides for both rounds of interviews.

Keeping these question types in mind, I felt it was very important for me to ask questions that would get to the heart of the differences and unique aspects of the EMCHS principalship. Through my interviewing, I asked about the participants' experiences, the challenges they face(d), how they work(ed) through these challenges, and how and if they understood and demonstrated culturally responsive leadership. I was also intentional when seeking out specific examples from their practice. These semi-structured interviews lasted at least an hour each, and consisted of 15-20 questions; however, I asked additional questions to guide off-track participants and those who were reluctant to answer questions in depth. After each interview was finished, a professional transcriber was hired to immediately transcribe the recorded interviews. After receiving the transcriptions, I sent each interview participant a draft copy to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. This process allowed me to ensure that I had not misquoted or misinterpreted the responses of any participants. No edits, additions, deletions, or changes were suggested by any of the participants.

Appendix A contains a list of the interview questions I used for the first round. The interview protocol in Appendix A includes a few demographic and warm-up questions about how the participant came to be a leader in an EMCHS setting. The interview guide is divided into two different sections: (a) interview questions for principals who have experience in both traditional high school and EMCHS settings, and (b) interview questions for principals who have only led in EMCHS settings.

In order to respect the time of the participants, I completed each of the three second-round interviews during the same visit as the observations, instead of completing



them on separate dates and increasing the risk of potential scheduling conflicts. My observation visits included a pre-observation interview, observation, and post-observation interview. Appendix B includes the interview questions for the second round of semi-structured interviews (the pre- and post-observation questions). This interview guide includes fewer questions, but they are more intentional and direct questions about the challenges, experiences, navigation of challenges, and understanding and demonstrations of culturally relevant leadership within the EMCHS setting. The second-round interview also included follow-up questions pertaining to what I had seen and heard during the observation.

### **Observations**

I collected observational data from the same three study participants who were selected to be interviewed in the second round; I completed each of the observations during the same visit as the second-round interview. Efron and Ravid (2013) describe qualitative observations as either unstructured or semi-structured. Efron and Ravid submit that semi-structured observations require the observation to start with and be focused around a specific set of issues or problems, while unstructured observations have no frame or lens until after the observation is complete and the data are analyzed. To meet the needs of the research design, the observations that I conducted were all semi-structured, using the experiences and challenges of EMCHS principals and their acts of culturally responsive leadership as my points of observational focus.

Researchers assert that observers must decide what their role will be during the observation. Observers can either conduct the observation from afar, be a full participant

observer, or be a hybrid of the two (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Lichtman, 2012). When considering my role as researcher during the observations in this study, I most certainly pursued a hybrid approach. I was able to not only observe the participating principals from a distance, especially when they were engaging with school stakeholders, but I was also encouraged by the participating principals to engage in dialogue with staff and students. I was also able to ask clarifying questions of the participants when the time was appropriate.

Prior to engaging in data collection through observations in a subject's natural setting, Lichtman (2012) suggests that researchers should plan out the following details: (a) identify a specific individual or group to observe, (b) identify three to five focus areas to pay close attention to, (c) decide on an information recording method or technique, and (d) determine the length and frequency of the observations. With Lichtman's (2012) planning process in mind, I decided to observe principals who (through the interview process) demonstrated a significant level of insight related to the categories of my research questions, which also served as my focus areas for the observations. The observations were conducted individually with three separate participants on different days, but on the same day as the participants' second-round interview. Each observation was conducted at the participant's school, lasting 3-4 hours. To record my observation data, I used photographs and a voice recorder when appropriate; however, my primary data collection tool was the observation protocol that I created (Appendix C).

Efron and Ravid (2013) maintain that observation protocols are designed to record "field notes that are detailed descriptions of what you see, hear, and sense during

the observation, and the thoughts, feelings, and understandings these observations provoked” (p. 88). During these observations, I was able to shadow the participating principals in their school settings, taking descriptive and reflective field notes into my observation protocol. While observing, I was specifically looking for and paying close attention to how principals interacted with their stakeholders, challenges that arose or were mentioned, how these challenges were addressed by the principal, and any evidence of an understanding or lack thereof of culturally responsive leadership.

### **Data Analysis**

After all the interviews and observations were conducted and transcribed, and the data review was complete, I began the process of coding the transcripts. My primary focus was to identify unique, yet common (unique to the EMCHS setting and common among EMCHS principals) experiences and challenges along with steps to navigate these experiences and challenges. I also wanted to identify specific evidence of understandings and/or demonstrations of culturally responsive leadership. Throughout this process, I employed several of Savin-Baden and Major’s (2013) approaches when analyzing and organizing the data. Savin-Baden and Major argue that “most qualitative researchers engage in some combination of the following phases: characterizing, cutting, coding, categorizing, converting, and creating” (p. 419). For the purpose of analyzing my data I utilized all but the creating phase.

Prior to conducting their data analysis, researchers must first determine how they will characterize their data for the transcriptions. While it is important for the transcription to be verbatim, it is through the act of “characterization” whereby

researchers determine which features and the levels of detail that are most appropriate for the transcription of interviews (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). For this study, I used a basic verbatim transcription of the interview protocols and did not place a heavy emphasis on including interaction features such as small or social talk before and after the interviews, verbal tics like “ah” and “um,” or participants’ tone or pauses during responses. Because of the nature of my interview protocols, I did not believe that these interaction features would add value to my data interpretation.

As I immersed myself in the data, I conducted several complete readings of each of the interview transcriptions and observation field notes. I then started the first step in the actual analysis process, which is “cutting” the data/transcription into meaningful segments (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Cutting individual words, phrases, sentences, key terms, and powerful points allowed me to reduce the large amount of information and to conduct a closer examination of the data. Because the literature on the EMCHS principalship is limited, I decided to analyze these data with no predetermined categories at hand. Instead, I utilized the coding technique of identifying emerging categories and commonalities across the participants and documents (Efron & Ravid, 2013).

The codes that I developed came directly from the data/transcriptions. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) call these codes “inductive” codes (p. 422). During the coding phase I was able to identify patterns in responses, participant attitudes towards different aspects of the principalships, and commonalities among responses. I also assigned a meaning or description to each of the data segments that I cut and coded. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) argue that coding “makes it easier to search data, make comparisons

and identify patterns worthy of further investigation” (p. 422). My goal through the coding process of this analysis was to not only summarize the chunks of transcription using codes that derived from the actual language of the transcriptions, but also to chunk the data into codes based on my interpretation of the themes within the transcriptions (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Once I established an exhaustive list of codes from the transcriptions, I then “categorized” the codes into manageable lists. These were both flat (general lists) and hierarchical lists which included sub-codes (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Converting the categorized codes into themes was my final, and arguably the most important, step in the data analysis process as this allowed me to interpret the data and respond to my initial research questions.

### **Positionality/Reflexivity**

As a researcher, it is important that I disclose my positionality and how I was situated within this study and among my research participants. At the time of data collection, I was a 31-year-old, African American male high school principal in the state of North Carolina. I was in my second year as the principal of an EMCHS, and my second year as a principal in general. All of my principalship experience had been in this one particular setting. I had four years of assistant principal experience in a traditional middle school and had also worked in multiple (non-administrative) capacities in a traditional high school setting. While I had no experience as a principal in a traditional school setting, my experiences as principal in an EMCHS allowed me to gain greater insight into the conditions and challenges in this setting.

Due to my knowledge of and experiences with traditional school principals, I believed that many of the challenges I faced were unique to my specific setting. Upon my assignment as the principal of an EMCHS, many of my colleagues expressed their feelings that being a principal in the EMCHS setting was much easier than that of a traditional setting. In full disclosure, I resented those comments and beliefs of my peers, and did not want to be discredited as a hardworking principal because I served in an EMCHS. It has been my experience that one setting was not easier than the other; rather, both settings had challenges that were unique.

Through this study, I have identified indicators of the unique challenges of the EMCHS setting. Each of my study participants were acting EMCHS principals at some point in their careers. Although every school is different, it was likely for us to all share some experiences, challenges, and understandings of the EMCHS principalship. Because of our shared roles in educational leadership, it was also likely that we would speak the same EMCHS language, allowing participants to have a level of comfort and familiarity with me as the researcher. Disclosing my research positionality was imperative, as it could have had major implications for this study. Access to participants could have been affected since I could have been viewed by participants as having a first-hand understanding of the conditions of the EMCHS principalship. This positionality could have also shaped the nature of researcher-researched relationship, allowing principals to be more willing to participate and share their experiences (Berger, 2013). Not only did my positionality affect how my participants chose to engage with my study, it also

affected how I posed questions and follow-up questions, how I filtered the information gathered from participants, and how I made meaning of this information (Berger, 2013).

Having the shared experience of the EMCHS principalship with my research participants had its advantages and obstacles. On one hand, being an EMCHS principal allowed me to have a better and more in-depth understanding of the perceptions of my participants than a researcher without experience as an ECMHS principal. On the other hand, it was imperative that I remained conscious of my positionality and avoided allowing my own experiences to influence my participants' engagement with the study or my interpretation of the participants' experiences.

In order to capitalize on my positionality as an EMCHS principal, while not allowing it to influence the design, analysis, or validity of my research study, I employed several reflexive strategies. I used these strategies in my effort to turn "the researcher lens back onto oneself to recognize and take responsibility for one's own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation" (Berger, 2013, p. 2). To be reflexive, I transcribed all interviews, utilized participants' language, and avoided including my thoughts and feelings regarding their responses until the analysis process was completed. Moreover, Berger (2013) offers another reflexivity strategy that I incorporated, "repeated review" (p. 12). With this, I reviewed each participant's interview for a second time several weeks after my initial analysis. This second, delayed review helped me to have a clear lens and identify any areas that my positionality may have affected my reading and analysis of the transcripts.

Because of my positionality, it was imperative to the integrity of this study that I detach myself from my interview participants in an effort to avoid influencing their responses, which would have compromised the results of this study (Efron & Ravid, 2013). It is without a doubt that my experiences as an EMCHS principal and my passion for understanding all that I could about my role as the principal in this setting have been major influences in terms of how I planned and conducted this study. I was cognizant of my need to be reflexive as it pertained to this research and understood that my perspectives, experiences, and position could possibly influence my research. Due to my self-awareness of the potential impact that my positionality could have had on my data collection, I did my best to design and execute a study that allowed me to use my personal connection to this study in ways that benefitted rather than undermined the research (Efron & Ravid, 2013).

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness and ethical considerations were important aspects to consider within my research study as I attempted to add valuable research to the field of educational leadership. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest, “being able to trust research results is especially important to professionals in applied fields because practitioners intervene in people’ lives” (p. 237). To ensure trust and validity for readers, I conducted this study in an ethical manner, paying careful attention to my data collection, analysis, and interpretation methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For auditing purposes, each interview was recorded and transcribed, and will be securely maintained for a minimum of 3 years. After each interview was conducted and transcribed, I sent participants the



transcriptions to ensure accuracy, giving them an opportunity to share any feedback they may have had. All of the participants acknowledged receipt of the transcripts; however, none of them provided any feedback.

My collection of different forms of data included both interviews and observations. The data I collected from my initial round of interviews informed who I would choose to participate in a second-round interview and observation. The data collected from the observations remained consistent with the data collected from the first round of interviews. The pairing of these two methods was instrumental in supporting the trustworthiness of this study. I also utilized the strategy of adequate engagement to increase trust and validity. Although I intended to conduct 14 interviews and 3 observations, and I did just that, in an effort to get as close as possible to the conditions and experiences of principals in EMCHS, I was willing to continue interviewing (either additional rounds or additional participants) until the data I collected began to be redundant. Adequate engagement is when “data and emerging finding [must] feel saturated” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). I was pleased that by the end of my data collection process, the research participants’ interview responses and my observation field notes began to repeat the same data. It was then I knew that I had adequately engaged in the data collection process, thus adding validity to the research.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue that the validity of a study is dependent on the ethics of the research. With this in mind, it was an overarching priority of mine to ensure that ethical considerations were attended to throughout the research process. To protect the identities and confidentiality of my participants, I replaced all identifying information

with codes or aliases. Concerning data analysis, I remained cognizant of my responsibility as the researcher to include all pertinent data and findings, despite any contradictions to my views or experiences.

### **Benefits and Risks**

Because EMCHSs target student groups who have traditionally been underserved in various school settings, I believe that my research study on the experiences and challenges of EMCHS principals and how they understand culturally responsive leadership promotes CRL practices in the broader sense. In fact, when EMCHSs are successful, it is usually because they are fostering equity at all levels. By uncovering the conditions and factors specific to EMCHSs and their principals, I hope to have added valuable data to the current but limited body of research surrounding the EMCHS principalship. Through this research study, I provided a guide for other educational leaders to follow when implementing equity and justice in the schools they lead, whether in EMCHS or comprehensive settings.

There were no foreseeable risks associated with participating in this study. The participants in this study each had the opportunity to benefit from reflecting on their role as a principal in their respective schools. Through their reflection, post-interview discussions, and observation participation, participants were able to gain and apply effective strategies to their current site-based issues and challenges. Additionally, being allowed to express and talk through current challenges often leads to new solutions. The identity of each participant was kept confidential, along with interview recordings,

transcriptions, and responses. Once all interview data have been stored for the appropriate length of time they will then be disposed of to further ensure participant confidentiality.

### **Limitations**

The purpose of this study was to identify the experiences and challenges that are unique to principals of EMCHSs, highlight the strategies principals in these settings use to navigate these experiences and challenges, and gain an understanding of these principals' knowledge and demonstration of culturally responsive leadership. Because every school is different and unique in its own sense, this uniqueness is also carried over into the leadership style and characteristics of each principal. Due to the limited size of my sample, the data collected are not generalizable. Additionally, considering that participants had a range of principal experience, what is considered a challenge to one may not even be an issue to another based simply on the differing lengths of experience of the study participants. Readers must also understand that the findings from this study are a sampling of experiences and challenges rather than an exhaustive list.

### **Chapter Summary**

To address the research questions of this study, I utilized a basic qualitative approach. I selected 11 current and former EMCHS principals to participate in my study through interviews and observations. These participants represented a diverse sampling of principals from several LEAs within the central part of North Carolina. Given my close professional connection to the EMCHS principalship, I decided to include myself as a participant in the interview process as well. I carefully coded the data into themes. When conducting and analyzing this research, I was sure to pay close attention to my

positionality to ensure that my study remained trustworthy and ethical. In the following chapter, I discuss the findings from my study.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS**

In conducting this research study, my purpose was to take a close look at the principalship of the Early/Middle College High School (EMCHS) setting, the experiences that these principals share, and how they understand and demonstrate culturally responsive leadership in their schools. It is possible that the findings from my study may inform newly appointed EMCHS principals and the district leaders who supervise and provide them with support. My findings may provide various stakeholders a better understanding regarding the experiences and challenges of principals in these unique settings.

This study sought to answer three specific questions:

1. What are the challenges and experiences of early/middle college high school principals?
2. How do early/middle college high school principals navigate these challenges and experiences?
3. How do current and former early/middle college high school principals understand the meaning of culturally responsive leadership and how does it influence their practice?

To conduct this qualitative study, I had 11 acting principals from various school districts in North Carolina participate in an initial in-depth semi-structured interview. Of

the 11 participants, six were currently acting EMCHS principals, and five were principals who had experience leading both traditional high school settings and EMCHSs. I asked three principals (two acting EMCHS principals and one traditional principal with experiences in both settings) to participate in a second semi-structured interview and a semi-structured observation of them in their school setting.

In this chapter, I present the findings from both rounds of interviews and the observations conducted with participating principals. This chapter contains four major sections. Three sections are aligned to each of the research questions on the EMCHS principalship, and one section is dedicated to the findings from each of the principal observations. In the first section I share findings related to the challenges and experiences of early/middle college high school principals. I organized my report of findings into subsections that represent each of the three themes that emerged from my analysis of the interview data:

- Being the only administrator in the building and/or EMCHS principal in the district adds unique experiences and challenges to the role.
- Navigating the different demands and nuances of the school district and college partner is a unique experience and often challenges EMCHS principals.
- EMCHS principals dispel the misconception that the small size of their schools coupled with their target student population serves only as a benefit, and that there are in fact both benefits and challenges associated with the size and populations of these settings.

To summarize these themes, I use the short-hand phrases “Lone Ranger,” “Serving Two Masters,” and “Size Does Matter,” respectively.

In the second section, I present the findings related to how early/middle college high school principals navigate challenges and experiences. I again organized my report of findings into subsections that represent each of the two themes that emerged from my analysis of the interview data:

- EMCHS principals take advantage of peer and district support and utilize shared and distributive leadership practices to navigate the challenges and experiences associated with the EMCHS setting.
- EMCHS principals consistently utilize advocacy and communication strategies to navigate the specific nuances associated with serving two masters: the school district and the college partner.

To summarize these themes, I use the short-hand phrases “Strength in Numbers” and “Let’s Talk,” respectively.

In the third section, I share findings related to principals’ understanding and demonstration of culturally responsive leadership. The subsections reflect two themes that emerged from my analysis of the data:

- Current and former EMCHS principals understand culturally responsive leadership to require a keen understanding of the student populations they serve, and not to be limited to racial diversity alone. Current and former EMCHS principals understand that there is a relationship between culturally

responsive leadership (CRL) and the type of school environment principals establish.

- Their understanding of CRL influences current and former EMCHS principals' efforts to meet the specific needs of the students they serve by providing various opportunities and ensuring an inclusive environment and curriculum.

To summarize these themes, I use the short-hand phrases "Who Are We?" and "Knowledge Is Power," respectively.

Finally, in the fourth section I present the findings from the three semi-structured observations that I conducted. I discuss how the observation findings are related to the themes I identified after analyzing the interviews.

### **Challenges and Experiences of EMCHS Principals**

In this section I present the findings related to challenges and experiences of the EMCHS principalship. Through the interview data, three primary themes emerged which I summarized as Lone Ranger, Serving Two Masters, and Size Does Matter.

#### **Lone Ranger**

Being the only administrator in the building and/or EMCHS principal in the district adds unique experiences and challenges to the role. The principals in my study consistently discussed their experience as a lone administrator, and the conditions associated with that. Principal Ashlee spoke of the multiple hats she wore as the principal in an EMCHS:



Well, I was the curriculum facilitator, I was the testing coordinator. I'm trying to think of all the other things that we do, and dealing with buses . . . I will say I'm also part-time social worker, part-time nurse, I just had a—couple, two of my students in here this morning, the little girl comes from a family that's less than ideal and her father is abusive and she's wanting to leave home, she'll be 16 in 6 months and her sisters overheard her talking about the fact that she wants to emancipate herself when she's 16 and so she had to go tell her mother that yes, that is her plan. Her mother told her father, her father's already sent her a text saying you think you're unhappy now, you just wait 'til you get home, I'll show you what unhappy is, so, you know, you're dealing with all of those issues because you're so small.

Principal Daniel added,

At the early, or at the middle college, you know, you have to do a little bit of everything, you know, you don't have a lot of administrative help and so you know, you have to wear, just like everybody there, you have to, you know, you've got to wear a lot of hats at the middle college . . . you have to know a little bit of everything in order to you know, in order to run the place.

Principal Damon had an opportunity to open an EMCHS; he described his multiple roles at the onset of the program:

well, at the very, very beginning we wore every hat, because that's all that we had. And I was the promoter, was a big part of that, I had to promote the program. And you know, I was a curriculum facilitator. I was designing the curriculum and the master schedule. And, then I was the HR person, human resources, because I was having to recruit a staff.

With the lack of some of the essential staff members that a traditional principal may have, some EMCHS principals described taking on some roles that are often taken for granted, like a school custodian or bus driver. Principal Kristyn explained her role as a custodian in her school:

There are leaves out there I'm sure in that front lobby right now, looking crazy, I'll go down there and vacuum them up because they know that's a—it's a ill pill for me . . . If the bathroom was kinda crazy and nasty, okay, either clean it up or be quiet about it, take out the trash, just make our school look the best it possibly can, so okay, on that level, yes, I'm gonna clean up.

When speaking of the hats she wore as an EMCHS principal, Principal Nichelle added,

so I do not have an assistant principal. I do not have a curriculum facilitator. So I serve as the principal, the assistant principal, the curriculum monitoring team . . . You know, I'm the bus driver a lot of times. I drive field trips. I cover classes when I can't find a sub. I do all the paper work, all the discipline, all the text books. I do all the professional development for the most part.

While principals embrace the various roles in which they must serve, being a “Lone Ranger” has proven to be a challenge for EMCHS principals. Some of these roles can cause internal turmoil for principals, especially when there is no one to whom they can delegate tasks. Principal Kristyn discussed not having the support of an assistant principal, stating,

you don't really kind of think about all the other pieces that kind of factor into the things that you have to do, responsibilities, paperwork, observations. There's no one else to push that off on. I mean, you can't give that to a lead teacher or college liaison, that is you.

Principal Ashlee went on to add:

I find a real conflict between being the principal of a school and handling the testing. I just don't think that that's appropriate, but there are a whole lot of early-middle college principals who do it and I had done it every year up to this year, and the thing about it is because our early college kids are highly motivated they do grow and they do score well and then everybody's looking at you and they're going who, who's in charge of this.

Additionally, Principal Joseph expressed the challenge with his experience as the “Lone Ranger”:

You’re always—you have to be accessible. And so it’s like you’re taking the 125 students in my case, 20 teachers, and everybody wants an answer and you’re it, because there are no assistant principals, there is nobody else, so you’re taking all the things that a traditional principal would do in a traditional high school as well as the things that an assistant principal would do, and oftentimes, all the things that a curriculum person would do, and you’re folding them into one basket and you’re expecting for that one individual to run, not only the instructional component, but the procedure and the policy components of the school, the instructional component of the school, you’re expected for them to run but the morale and climate of your school, it can be very, very cumbersome in the event that you want to do it and do it well.

Principals also expressed a feeling of professional loneliness associated with the EMCHS principalship. Principal Kimberly explained, “When I first got here, it was very lonely not having an assistant principal, coming from a school of 1,400 kids. I was very, very lonely my first year here. It was very different.” When describing her experience versus a peer’s in a traditional school setting, Principal Ashlee added,

You don’t have a team and not having someone to bounce things off of, not having someone to share challenges with, and help with the load, that is not something they experience. Most of our high schools have three assistant principals, you know, so you’ve got a team of four, some of them have a team of five.

Principal Joseph’s experience was very similar, and he expressed his challenge in this way:

not having an administrative team, although the principalship’s already lonely, when you don’t have an administrative team it just makes it that much more challenging, and having all of my previous experience being in traditional high

schools, it was like you always had somebody just to kind of bounce some ideas off, and sometimes when you're in—you know, you come up with these grandiose ideas and you end up over in left field by yourself, you know, you need somebody to kind of pull you back in.

The professional loneliness that participants described was also related to their districts and peers, and not just within their schools. Principal Nichelle stated, “so, yeah, my job is—it’s pretty lonely because nobody else does exactly what I do and there’s a perception that everything over here is perfect and I don’t need help.” Principal Evette added,

I feel very alone a lot of times and I’ve been trying to get to some meetings with some other early college principals. I know one, she’s at a school in a neighboring district. She’s at the early college there. We talk some, but we still have very different needs and views on things sometimes. So I do feel very alone sometimes, I’m just gonna be very honest with you about that.

Being an instructional leader (conducting classroom observations, supporting and evaluating teachers, providing and leading staff development opportunities) is a main obligation for many principals, whether in a traditional setting or in an EMCHS. Principal Evette, however, shared her unique experience as an instructional leader in an EMCHS:

So of course, you know, being an instructional leader, you know, being in the classroom. This is probably been my toughest year here for a lot of reasons. But I’ve had to, you know, step up and take on more roles. I was actually teaching a class last semester. And I know there are other principals who do that, you know, speaking with some other early college principals. My guidance counselor and I did Success 101, which is kind of an intro before the ACA 122 that students take. I also had some online classes I was doing too with students to give them some CTE credits.

Overall, I found that professional loneliness was among one of the many challenges and experiences associated with the EMCHS principalship. Principals in this study described a feeling of isolation, as none of them had the administrative teams they were accustomed to in traditional school settings. Additionally, many participants highlighted the challenge of being the only EMCHS principal in their school district, leaving them void of the collegial support to which they were accustomed. This professional isolation, EMCHS principals explained, resulted in the need to balance various roles and responsibilities that are not commonly associated with the school principalship.

### **Serving Two Masters**

Another theme that emerged from the participants' interviews was related to the experiences principals shared when it came to satisfying expectations of both their school districts and college partners. Navigating the different demands and nuances of the school district and college partner is a unique experience and often challenges EMCHS principals.

Principal Joseph described having to navigate the expectations and responsibilities in the following way:

It was almost like a principal-liaison between—on the being on the college campus, I was the liaison between the school system and the school and the school and the university. And so from an administrative perspective, the roles included making sure the university and its leadership and executives were abreast—kept abreast about what challenges, as well as accomplishments, the school was making, what needs the school had, as well as making the district aware, and then trying to figure out the balance between who was responsible for making these pieces happen.

The relationships with and between these governing bodies were described as both challenging and supportive by other EMCHS principals. Principal Ashlee spoke highly of the president of her college partner and also her district's superintendent:

Then when the president came to this community college, who is a magnificent man, he had an early college, middle college where he was from at his community college there, so he came wanting this program to grow and wanting to support it and willing to say oh, we will create space for you and you can be on a regular schedule . . . We also have a really, really good, strong superintendent right now, together, the two of them really put a lot of thought into starting the early college and transitioning from being a middle college to being an early college.

Principal Kristyn shared a similar positive experience with her college president and superintendent, emphasizing the fact that they worked well together:

Our president is very open to, you know, sitting down and talking to me, we schedule a meeting at least twice per year, just to have a sit-down, and say okay, where are we right now, so that he's fully aware of what's going on and how to communicate to his colleagues how we're doing. And then he and our superintendent, they also talk about our early college and the things that, you know, we possibly need.

There were some principals who experienced relationships with their partner colleges that were more of a challenge. When discussing the importance of the school and college partner relationship, Principal Kimberly had this to say:

So, really making sure we have those relationships with the college, that has got much better, I would say that that was a challenge previously . . . working with the professors who don't necessarily want to teach high school students . . . how do we get past that hurdle, how do we form those relationships, how do we teach these 14-year-olds that, you know, who are sitting in classes with 18- to 60-year-olds to conduct themselves in the proper manner.

Principal Nichelle expressed a similar challenge as she discussed her dependency on the college partnership, and how she felt that she was at their mercy. She explained,

And working with people who don't have to work with me, they can just say, "Your kid is a college kid and he's not doing what he's supposed to do, so sorry." Out the door, you know, so—and I can't go in those college classes and look at their instruction like I can high school classes. I could say to my high school teacher, "Listen, there's no assessment," or, "Your lesson plans are not enough. Why is this kid not improving?" I can't do that in the college level and that's where my kids can't graduate from high school without them.

When considering tensions between the college partner and public school district and moments of differing agendas and priorities, participating principals expressed a feeling of being "stuck in the middle." Principal Damon shared the following experience:

But there I had the superintendent in my other ear saying, "I don't give a damn," he'd quote, "I don't give a damn about the grant. You're a middle college. Your goal is to save kids, reduce the dropout rate. Period." So I was kind of in the middle there . . . we kind of played the middle of the road, but it was tough, because you had the college liaison really pushing us to go with a more—less needy kid . . . But the relationship with the college president was really good. It was good, but you had two different kind of directions they were pulling me in at the time, and ultimately, I listened to the superintendent.

In his interview, Principal Joseph spoke of the pressure he endured while having to straddle the fence between both programs when it came to college promotion. He added,

and the pressure in that particular setting from not only the university was, hey we need to make sure that we get some of those students coming here and that the students have an opportunity to apply here and we want to make sure that we're bringing students that are going to help our enrollment, but then, from the school district perspective, "hey we want to start making sure that some of those students are looking at Ivy League schools," and everybody wants the top school, everybody wants the top kids, you know, so it then becomes that balance of

pressure of okay, do I feed them into the school that I'm in—on their campus, or do I feed them somewhere else, and then what's the happy medium.

Regardless of the nature of the relationship between the EMCHS and the college partner, physical space was a challenge that consistently emerged throughout the interviews. Unlike their traditional school peers, EMCHS principals must follow their college partners' requests and requirements regarding space and facility usage. In fact, Principal Kristyn spoke of “running out of space” as her program grew. Principal Ashlee explained her challenge with space:

This isn't my building. We are guests on a college campus. Space is always an issue. This is my third office. This is our second location. We are probably moving this Fall to another building . . . The prior president really didn't support the middle college and the rooms were used by college instructors when we weren't in the classroom and teachers were not allowed to put anything up on the walls, no kind of work, no kind of anything, which is very oppressive in a high school environment.

With EMCHS principals having to meet district mandates concerning school safety procedures and student attendance, among other things, while operating on a college campus, space is hardly the only challenge when it comes to functioning on their college partner's campus. Principal Evette provided a specific challenge that she faced regarding the navigation of school safety on her college partner's campus:

but the biggest challenge for me, like I said, is that partnership, you know, having to work with another entity. It is my campus, but—because my assistant superintendent says all the time, “It's your campus. You do what you want.” Yeah, it's easy to say that, but I have a lady up the hill that's gonna say, “What are you thinking?” I'll give you for instance. We had a rumor on campus that we—that we had, one of our students was a drug dealer. Pretty reliable rumor, according to our student, you know, our school resource officer, and I tried to



organize, you know, a drug search with dogs . . . The lady at the top of the hill, who is kind of the dean of our campus, she said, “You’re not searching my parking lot. You’re not doing anything up here.” So it’s just that partnership though, is—that’s what makes it tough. You know, the complexity of having to monitor students with two programs, basically, and not necessarily having the support that you feel like you need to have from the school system.

Principal Ashlee also shared her frustrations around the district-mandated school crisis plan:

So the normal crisis team approach doesn’t work and that is a challenge, the whole crisis team thing, because I have to send in a crisis team plan every year but I just send in college partner’s crisis plan because we are guests on their campus. We follow their protocol. We do what they tell us to do in any kind of, you know, given situation. Same thing for fire drills, same thing, you know, we’re on their campus, we can’t have our own little fire drill.

Another challenge that Principal Ashlee shared was about the varying schedules between the school district and college. More specifically, she stated,

Oh, another challenge is when the college is open but we’re [the district] closed. That’s a huge challenge and I haven’t found a way to satisfactorily handle that for our students who have classes when they can’t get to school because our school system’s closed. Our buses are not gonna run but the college is open.

An additional issue that was consistent among the participants was the challenge of balancing both the public high school and college curriculums for the high school students in their programs. In fact, when discussing her instructional planning and scheduling process, Principal Evette described it as “definitely a big challenge in an early college, having to go between two programs.”

Principal Ashlee spoke of a specific challenge she experienced with trying to dual enroll students into a college course: “It makes no sense to me that the state would not okay those classes, but they say they do not follow the North Carolina curriculum for PE or for Health, so therefore that can’t count.” Challenges such as this were common among the participants. When discussing testing and school accountability, Principal Kimberly shared a challenge balancing both academic programs:

one of the challenges that the school has always faced is we have our students as juniors take biology at the college to get their high school credit, so they take Biology 111 and Biology 112. The end of their junior year, they are state tested on the Biology EOC, the courses do not align.

Principal Joseph shared a similar experience in terms of balancing the curricula of both programs, and their misalignment:

So while your school district is focusing on the teaching and learning as it relates to student performance on a state assessment, those assessments and that vetting process for what courses you were going to take on the university setting were not necessarily always aligned. So, I can take a level four or five student in any math course—and they may take the college entry exam, and not score out of the general ed. math course. And so those two pieces were not aligned. However, there were skillsets that we could put into place that would better prepare them for the university course, a university placement assessment, which would then allow them to take courses that were on more advanced level, or even place out of some of those courses, but it would mean that we would have to frontload some of those things in some district level courses that were not necessarily aligned and were not necessarily a part of that curriculum.

Since EMCHS principals are responsible for student success in both the high school and college portions of their programs, one could imagine the frustration a principal could experience knowing that they have all the responsibility but no authority.

This lack of authority at the college/university level provides a unique experience for EMCHS principals. A large part of the EMCHS principalship is collaborating with the college partner, regardless of the nature of that relationship. In our interview, Principal Nichelle explained this experience as something that was necessary and very influential to her role as the principal. She stated,

So, well, I can't exist without my community college partner. So that's a big influence every day whether it be meeting with instructors, or meeting with college leadership, or meeting with students to figure out why they're not passing their class, or finding them some help to pass their class, or analyzing transcripts, I think that, that part existing as a school within a school that you can't control probably impacts me a lot today. That was something that I did not anticipate taking so much of my time, but it takes a lot of my time.

Principal Evette explained a similar experience as a challenge of the EMCHS setting:

That's probably been my biggest struggle this year, honestly . . . Having to work with another entity. And to work together, even though we may have, at the end of the day we mostly have the same goals, but sometimes we have different ways of getting there. Something that was very hard for me when I first came here was having to back off of, you know, having my hands on the college classes, you know, I've always been very involved, you know, being in the classroom and talking with students and parents about success, and, you know, if students were struggling, academic struggles and success, and having to, you know, have to step back from the college courses and having to delegate that task, that was very hard for me. And not because I'm a control freak, just because I've always been very hands on, so that piece has been a challenge.

In summary, EMCHS principals described having to meet and manage the demands and requirements from both their college partner and school district as a major component of the EMCHS principalship. These demands and requirements surrounded facilities, school accountability, college enrollment, student selection, school safety

procedures, funding, and support, just to name a few. Through this study, I found that these principals experienced this unique dynamic in both positive and negative ways, all depending on the level of relationship that developed between the principals and the representatives of the differing entities. Because of these multifaceted relationships, principals were often left with all the responsibility for but little to no authority over college staff who teach and interact with their students. EMCHS principals also described their frustrations with being left out or forgotten by their school district due to the fact that they operate in non-district facilities and on non-traditional calendars.

### **Size Does Matter**

Through this study, I found that EMCHS principals disagree with the perception that the small size of their schools, coupled with their targeted student population, serves only as a benefit to them as school leaders. The participants do not believe, in essence, that it is easier to manage an EMCHS than a traditional high school. There are in fact both benefits and challenges associated with the size and student populations of these settings. In this section I discuss how EMCHS principals address common misconceptions of their roles and responsibilities. In subsections, I explain the most common misconception of the EMCHS principalship and the challenges associated with the EMCHS-targeted student population. In additional subsections I discuss how the participants perceived that the small school size affected their experiences as principals.

**Misconceptions.** During the interviews for this study, all principal participants addressed what they considered to be the most common misconceptions about the EMCHS principalship. Their responses were consistently focused on the misconception

that the EMCHS principalship was “easy,” or less of a challenge than that of their traditional high school principal peers. In one of her responses, Principal Kimberly shared her perception that other principals felt like the EMCHS principalship “was a cake walk and that they only serve the smartest kids.” Principal Nichelle added,

the opinion is that the Early College takes all of the good kids into their school and of course they have all those high scores because they get to pick and choose which kids come so they’re taking our good kids and putting them in their school and taking those kids away from us.

These types of opinions and misconceptions were insulting to some EMCHS principals. An instance of this is when Principal Nichelle stated, “I almost got offended because I was like, ‘Are you saying that they’re putting me in this place because anybody can do that job?’” When discussing these misconceptions, Principal Evette admitted that she held some of the same beliefs about the EMCHS setting before she was a principal there. She stated,

I absolutely did, because we used to joke at my last school that this was Disney World over here . . . Yeah. You know, you have all the good kids, you only have 100 some kids. What’s the—what’s really, you know, the challenge? . . . But yeah, I did absolutely have preconceived notions. I thought it was a pot job. I eat those words every day.

Principal Jacob shared a different misconception that he constantly heard as an EMCHS principal, which was, “You’re not going to have any faculty issues, it’s going to be a small issue. You’re not going to have any problem finding teachers, because who doesn’t want to go teach and have about 15 kids a class?” Principal Damon added, “the biggest

misconception I think, just real blunt, is that, you know, that it's easy because it's small, and everybody thinks just it's a cake walk."

Many of the misconceptions that the principal participants mentioned were associated with the EMCHS principalship being considered less of a challenge because of the small size of the school (number of students and staff) and the population (the "good kids") that it served. Not only was there a consistent effort to dispel the misconception that the EMCHS principalship was a less challenging or demanding job, but the findings of the study uncovered that the small size of the school setting and targeted student population presented both benefits and challenges related to the experiences of EMCHS principals.

**EMCHS student populations.** To dispel the notion that EMCHS principals had an easier or less challenging job because of they had all the "good kids" or "smart kids," principals in this study spoke consistently about the types of students they sought and the population their schools were designed to serve. None of the EMCHS principals in this study argued that they didn't have good and smart students in their schools. They did, however, stress that their schools intentionally sought after and were comprised of students who exhibited some form of challenge in one way or another. When asked about the students she serves, Principal Ashlee responded with:

the middle college handles a lot of children who have a lot of challenges . . . our primary focus is on first-generation and low socioeconomic families, and the purpose is so that those kids are going to accomplish and achieve education after high school and that's going to influence not only their immediate family but their big families, cousins, relatives, and their neighborhoods, because they're doing something and showing they can do something that nobody else in their family has done.

When describing the purpose of her school and other EMCHS settings, Principal Nichelle stated,

The purpose is for first-gen kids to break the cycle, to be the first generation in their family that gets a college degree of some sort. Making sure that typically underrepresented populations are represented higher in postsecondary education. That families from low socioeconomic statuses have the opportunity to get what they need as far as a college degree or kids who are at risk to not graduate or at risk not to pursue any postsecondary education . . . About 90% of our kids are first-gen here.

Principal Evette added,

We go after kids who, or we pursue, you know, kids who are possibly at risk of dropping out, you know . . . who need more of a challenge, but definitely, you know, that first-generation subset, we definitely pursue those students pretty hard.

When sharing her final thoughts on the EMCHS principalship, Principal Ashlee made an interesting point that helps to describe the student population she serves:

you really got to have the right heart to be here and you've really got to want to help those kids who have the most challenges, whether they're emotional challenges or economic challenges. It's a different population and they don't feel like they fit in . . . they are looking for this because they don't feel comfortable in that traditional high school. Even if they're very bright, they may have some emotional issues that they need to deal with or health issues that they need to deal with and you've got to want to handle all of those things.

When asked about his experience as an EMCHS principal, Principal Daniel described his school as:

an outlet for kids that didn't fit in the traditional setting. We were a combination of dropout prevention, we were a chance for kids that maybe would not ever make

it to higher education to kind of give them a taste of hey, this is college, you can do college level work.

In an effort to strike a balance between the misconceptions and reality, Principal Levi shared,

So I think the purpose is to select the students that are not on either end of the spectrum . . . So the students that are kind of there in the middle that may go to high school, and if someone's really not paying attention, they could miss eight or nine days in a row, and no one would miss them. That's kind of the students that I think it was created for.

Principal Damon added,

the key to the middle college being successful is to find those kids that are capable but are underachieving. And those were the ideal kids—a lot of the time they would be your kids that get in trouble. But not all the time. A lot of the times you had those kids that were skipping a lot, that were not discipline problems, but just disconnected, it's, you know, just weren't connected.

When it came down to the purposes of their schools and the types of students they sought, the participant responses were consistent. They overwhelmingly expressed a need and desire to serve students with academic, social, economic, and behavioral challenges. They also wished to serve students who were underrepresented in higher education and had the opportunity to be the first in their families to graduate high school and attend college.

***EMCHS student population challenges.*** When serving high school students in any setting, challenges are going to arise. When it came to the targeted student population



at EMCHSs, participating principals expressed some of the challenges they experienced.

Principal Daniel shared,

I think [other principals] do think it's a cake job, that it's easy, but it presents so many more challenges that you don't realize. You know, the benefits of being small is also a curse, you know, the—everybody knows everybody's business, you know, it's—socially, you know, you're dealing with kids that are not as adapt at the social aspect of school and so you've got a lot of, you know, social and emotional problems, you know, I think that comes along with some of the kids that gravitate toward the early middle college, you know, so it comes with its own share of problems.

Principal Damon, reflecting on how he had to manage the challenges with student attendance while still fulfilling his other principal duties, stated, “It was always make sure everybody's there, whoever's not there you got to find them. Find out where they are, why they're not there, and then you'd have to go get them.” He also expressed a desire during the time of his EMCHS principalship to adjust from his traditional school ways in order to effectively meet the needs of the many students with emotional issues. During his interview, he shared a story that was a typical experience for him in the EMCHS setting:

A student cussed me up and down, I mean, “Motherfucker this, that, and the other,” to me for 10 minutes. I stood there and took it right outside the door . . . And I remember it was kind of a moment for me, where I realized I couldn't react like I would in a traditional school—you know, here you'd suspend them and we couldn't do that there. You could, but it wouldn't do any good. I remember sitting there and taking it from her, just cussing me up and down for something just totally ridiculous.

This and other student challenges throughout his EMCHS experience were emotionally exhausting. He shared,

you're working your butt off. You're knowing those kids, you're tearing down those barriers that hold kids back, and finding out why they work. You know, it wears you out when you wear so many hats . . . and you become emotionally invested with so many of those kids.

When discussing the challenges of her student population, Principal Evette expressed an increase in the number of students on her campus that were suicidal. While EMCHS have become safe havens for many students with mental or emotional health issues, Principal Evette shared, "It feels more prevalent because we are so small, but because we are so small, everybody knows . . . it's an increase here. It's big."

**Small school setting.** While I did find that the small size of the EMCHS setting causes some challenges for principals, there were also benefits on which EMCHS principals were able to capitalize. The two main benefits that were found from the interviews were the positive relationships EMCHS principals were able to form by interacting more closely with fewer students and staff, and the ability to focus on instructional leadership. In explaining the impact her school's size had on her experience as an EMCHS principal, Principal Kimberly stated,

The small atmosphere, the fewer number of students, and the idea of forming relationships with these students and the social emotional needs of these students. I would say that the biggest shift between being a leader at a traditional school to being a leader at an Early College is that I am fully involved with every kid and fully involved with every teacher . . . I have the privilege of really forming true and genuine relationships with students and supporting them.

Principal Kimberly then went on to add how the personal investment that is associated with the small school setting is well worth any struggles that may come along the way; she stated,

It is the hardest job I've ever had, hard in a good way, exhausting, emotionally exhausting job, because I care so much, these people, this school, this is my extended family, and it is a much different all-inclusive role than a traditional school. In a traditional school, I could kind of turn it off and go home, can't turn this one off.

Principal Evette also made mention of a personal investment when associating her school relationships to that of a family, stating, "we are all very personally invested, and I keep using that phrase, but we are. We're like a family. We fuss and fight like family, and we love like family."

***Relationship building.*** When discussing the impact that the small size of their school had on their experience as EMCHS principals, participants consistently made mention of the positive relationships they were able to foster. It is the strong relationship that Principal Kimberly feels sets EMCHS and traditional high schools apart. She stated,

this job is just so, so different and so much more impactful in students' lives because of the relationships that you get to form with the students and knowing that their school experience is making a difference in the lives of 100% of them, not for maybe several hundred of them at a traditional school of 1,000 or 1,200 of the 1,400. I don't think that there is a more important principal role, to be honest, and that's not in our non-traditional schools, I love big schools. And if big schools could do this, I think our nation would be in a different place, but it's just not possible.

Principal Jacob highlighted the relationships that he was able to form as an EMCHS principal compared to his traditional high school experience. He added,

I knew their mom. I knew their cousin that came to all the awards. I knew their grandma who came. I knew grandpa who came. I knew they were living with their aunt. Hey, I knew they were going through some counseling outside of school. I knew those things. So when I sat down with 1,300 kids here, I don't know all those families. I don't know all of their stories.

Being able to call each of their students by name was something that many of the participants mentioned as an added benefit of the EMCHS size that helped them to foster positive relationships with students. Principal Daniel shared,

One of the things that I loved was being able to walk in the school and call every kid by name. I think that was a tremendous factor in leadership. I'm a big relationships guy, and if you can build relationships with kids, I think it makes everything work better and I think they're going to be better discipline-wise, I think they're going to be better academically. To be able to walk in the door every day and be able to call everybody by name and know a little bit about them, I thought was one of the biggest things that I enjoyed about the middle college, what made it work.

When discussing the relationships she experienced in her EMCHS, Principal Evette added,

And I mean, I did know a lot of kids at the traditional school, you know, I tried to have those personal relationships, but here I know every kid's name, so that's something, too. I might not have said every kid's name that I saw out there, but I know every kid's name, and that's something I would not necessarily—at the traditional school I was at, I wouldn't have necessarily have had the opportunity.

Principal Damon credits his success as a traditional school principal to the relationship-building experiences he had as an EMCHS principal. He shared,

I do think having had that experience of being a middle college principal, it's helped me in the large setting. It helped me really, really value and understand the significance and important of relationships and making the kids feel special . . . I know I'm a better principal because of that experience.

***Instructional leadership.*** Having the freedom to focus on being an instructional leader was a common benefit that participants described. This added focus on instruction is what Principal Joseph credits for his growth as an instructional leader. He shared,

Early middle college has allowed me to really grow as an instructional leader because it was so small. So from an instructional lens, which was an area that I didn't have a lot of experience in, being able to have critical instructional conversations was something that was a deficiency for me. Early middle colleges really challenge you to really dig down, because I didn't have, you know, for a long time I didn't have a curriculum specialist to be able to drive my instruction, I didn't have anybody to plan my professional development or staff meetings, and so that means that I had to figure out how to get that done.

When discussing his instructional leadership experiences in the EMCHS setting, Principal Jacob discussed the level of involvement he was able to attain with the core curriculum. He stated,

I felt like I was able to be an instructional leader, every day, in every classroom, with every kid, with every teacher. And I felt like when the teachers had to predict a student grade, I felt like I could have filled that out for my teachers. Because I felt like I was in the classrooms that much. I looked at the data that much. I felt like I was in the middle of the data, you know, I was sitting down with them, planning lessons with them.

Some of the current traditional school principals expressed a feeling of being out of touch with the instruction at their schools compared to the level of involvement they once had as an EMCHS principal. Principal Jacob went on to add:

I felt like I was able to be real relational, very quickly, all the time, and I didn't mind bothering the classroom sometimes, and coming in, but now I don't really have a good feel for where we're at . . . Moving to a traditional high school principalship, I'm not in my Math 1 classrooms every day. I want to be. I'm

scheduled throughout the week, to make visits. I didn't schedule that as a middle college principal, I knew where I was going to be.

While being in a small school setting allows for added attention to instruction, the small staff size was a consistent challenge across the participating principals. With small staffs, EMCHS rarely have more than one teacher in a particular subject area, limiting the collegial support that can be offered from within the school. Principal Daniel explained how this was a challenge for him:

I wanted to get my scores up, and then I'm looking and I'm like I've got one teacher teaching that, and I'm like I'm not an expert in that content, you know. I can help lead a PLC, but as far as the content knowledge, you know, I'm not much help. And that definitely could be said for other contents . . . to me the biggest struggle was changing the way I operated and going from that traditional high school into the middle college and being able to find ways to help those teachers grow and still dig into the numbers and the kids and—but finding a way to make it work in a smaller setting.

With small staffs, principals need to be careful not to overload or burn out their teachers. Principal Levi shared his challenges with developing leadership within his small staff. He stated,

There's 12 teachers as opposed to 72 teachers, so if you want to do some things, then it's easier to form a committee when you've got a pool of 72 teachers, but whenever you're trying to form a committee and you've got 12 teachers, it's hard to form a committee of more than three or four people to do certain things, whether it's kind of a sunshine committee for fun things or keeping up with birthdays or school leadership team, those type of things, that's kind of been challenging to kind of figure out how to do that and not to always go to the same people. If you've got 12 teachers, I can go the these four every single time, and I know that I'm going to get good work.

## Summary

In summary, EMCHS principals acknowledged and expressed a frustration with the perception that they had an easier job as principals than their traditional high school principal peers. Principals discussed how their EMCHS's purpose is to target at-risk, impoverished, minority, and first-generation high school/college students. They went on to add that their students had many and varying needs, which were at times difficult to address due to the limited number of support staff that existed in their small schools. However, these EMCHS principals did not complain about meeting the many needs of their student populations. Rather, they explained how they leveraged the small school setting to establish positive relationships with students and families. Additionally, EMCHS principals explained how the small size of their schools allowed for them to have an increased focus on instruction, further meeting the needs of their students.

When considering the challenges and experiences of the EMCHS principalship, I found several noteworthy points. For one, EMCHS principals experienced a level of professional loneliness associated with being the only EMCHS principal in their districts, and the only administrator in their buildings. Principals explained that this experience of loneliness came with additional roles and responsibilities that are not usually associated with the school principalship. Additionally, navigating both the school district and college partner landscapes was a major aspect of the EMCHS principalship. How principals experienced this dynamic largely depended upon the relationships that emerged between the EMCHS principal and college partner personnel. Finally, EMCHS

principals countered the misconception that they had an “easy” job because of their school size and student population.

### **How EMCHS Principals Navigate Challenges and Experiences**

In this section I present findings related to the ways in which EMCHS principals navigate the challenges and experiences of their unique settings. After analyzing the interview data, two themes emerged which I summarized as “Strength in Numbers” and “Let’s Talk.”

#### **Strength in Numbers**

From analyzing the interview data I collected on the challenges and experiences of the EMCHS principalship, we know that being the only administrator in a school, and possibly a district, presented a challenge for many of the principal participants. Through the interview process of this study, I found that EMCHS principals leverage their peers and district as supports. They also use distributive leadership practices to navigate challenges specific to their isolation as an administrator. While principals utilized these support networks primarily to alleviate their sense of isolation, they also accessed their sources of support when addressing various other challenges.

**Peer and district supports.** During our interview, Principal Ashlee spoke of forming a support group with other principals of nontraditional schools. She mentioned,

I have two partners, there are three of us who don’t fit anything else that, you know, fit anybody else’s profile. The principal of our alternative school and the principal of our career technical center, they—we’re always grouped together because nothing that people are talking about really apply to us. We have our own unique needs and we support each other all the time, so we’re kind of like the three musketeers when it comes to looking for out-of-the-box solutions to things that other people don’t deal with.



Principal Jacob added a similar experience as he addressed being isolated as an EMCHS principal. He stated,

the fact that I was able to go out and see EMCHS-Principal X and to see EMCHS-Principal Y and talk to those principals, in my second year there, a couple of other new people had come in, so we're having lunch with them during the summers. We try to spend a lot of time together, just kind of talking, "Hey, why don't we meet out at—let's meet down at . . ."

When recapping his experience as a new EMCHS principal, Principal Daniel mentioned using the support of peers to help him learn the nuances and intricacies of the EMCHS setting. He emphasized reaching out to others and said, "EMCHS Principal [anonymous] was huge! Knowing somebody that's going through kind of the same thing, you know, you've gotta find somebody that's doing what you're doing that you can relate to." Regardless of years of experience, it was common for EMCHS principals to form support groups with peers in similar settings.

Not only would principals capitalize on the support of their peers, but they took advantage of district resources; this was common across the participating principals.

When it came to supporting the instructional needs of a small staff, Principal Daniel capitalized on his central offices and teaching staffs in other schools. He stated,

We certainly tried to make some connections outside of the school. You know, hey, they're doing really good work over here, you know, let's team you up with this person. We took advantage of our district folks, our coaches, I think especially in math . . . they came in and helped us a bunch in math. The same was true in science.

Likewise, Principal Kimberly called on the district support staff and teachers at other schools to support her school's instructional needs. More specifically, she utilized them to help fill the student gaps between the high school and college curriculums. She added,

We have a woman who works in our district office, who taught biology in the district for years, we have her coming out, and that's our change this year is we have her coming out to work with kids twice a month during their seminar class to go over the biology standards with them. The teachers that I worked with at a previous school where we exceeded growth in biology, I had that teacher share her Quizlet with us. So, we have the students also doing her Quizlet that she used with her students that would get them through.

Being a new principal and new to the EMCHS setting was much less of an issue for Principal Kristyn because of a coach/mentor that she was provided through her district. When speaking of this support, she mentioned,

I had an incredible coach. The district provided a coach for me who was actually a former principal and she gave me so many different tidbits, insights. She was on the phone with me until one o'clock in the morning the night before school opened. So it made it less lonely and then my district was really good about making sure that I had connections to the central office and that I had phone numbers to key people should I need something, so they never just left me alone, by myself, or feeling like no one was here to help.

**Shared and distributive leadership.** EMCHS principals also utilized the talents of those within their buildings. EMCHS principals would find ways to develop leaders among staff within their buildings who, even though they were not administrators, could help principals navigate various challenges and experiences. Engaging in shared leadership was key for Principal Evette when she found herself overwhelmed with the multiple hats of the EMCHS principalship. She shared,

I have gone about things sometimes thinking that only I can do them. And I have tried to be more diligent this year with remembering that I do have a team here. I'm not by myself, even though I feel very alone sometimes. So my team, we have worked together, because I thought, "You know what? I'm looking at this, the counselor is looking at this, and we only have two sets of eyes on this. We're missing something." So my teachers, we have worked together on this master schedule, and so there are times that they see a conflict. So remembering I do have a team, and, you know, they are eight teachers strong, and my guidance counselor, my right hand, my college liaison, so definitely remembering that is key.

Principal Kimberly has adopted a shared leadership style to manage being the only administrator in her building. When describing her experiences, she stated,

My staff and I work very closely together, and the students as well, so we really believe in collaborative leadership here, and the decision making doesn't involve just me . . . we're a team and I'm the coach of that team, but I'm not calling all the plays.

Similarly, in his school, Principal Levi was also a huge proponent of shared leadership.

Everyone was expected to be a leader at his school. In his interview, he shared,

I think one of the things I've done is tried to, when we talk about the leadership team, I try to talk to the staff as, "We are all on the leadership team." There's only 12 of us, so we're all going to be part of the leadership team, so then trying to find some specific things that each person could do, whether it be for the Superintendent's Advisory Council or for some kind of training to bring back some stuff, sending some different people and giving them the opportunity to be a leader in front of the other 11 teachers, to make sure that everyone kind of feels as that they are part of it.

When navigating the gaps in student supports that existed between the school district and the college partner, Principal Evette coupled college resources with her

shared leadership style to meet the needs of her students. Facing challenging budget cuts, Principal Evette did the following to support students:

Once our college advisor gets the Starfish alerts from the college instructors, she puts some items in an email, and she will send that to the school counselor and I. At that point, we talk to students. If they're in danger of failing, if they missed a test, whatever it is. We do something every Friday, called seminar, and we have our teachers do it. They have at least two students and they check in on those students' grades. And I heavily advertise our tutors. We finally got two college tutors. We went all semester last semester without any tutors. Like I said, the budget cut was big for us and for our college partner, so our students didn't have access to that resource. So those are just some of the things that we're trying to do. And I do have one of my science teachers and both of my math teachers, they tutor after school, whether it's for college biology or not.

The consistent trend across participating principals was that the majority expressed the importance of forming teams and supports to navigate the experiences and challenges of the EMCHS setting. Even though they lead small staffs, EMCHS principals consistently practice shared and distributive leadership, building the capacity of their staff to help meet the many needs of their school setting. These principals also leveraged district supports and formed partnerships with non-traditional principal peers when available.

### **Let's Talk**

Through this study I found that EMCHS principals consistently utilize advocacy and communication strategies in order to navigate complexities and tensions associated with serving two masters: the school district and the college partners. Serving these two masters has proven to be a common challenge among EMCHS principals; however, in this study participants described various ways in which they have addressed this

challenge. By using advocacy and communication strategies, EMCHS principals have been able to manage the sometimes-competing demands of both educational settings.

**Advocacy.** In an effort to fight looming budget cuts, Principal Evette attempted to wield her political influence to advocate for her school and other EMCHSs. She shared in her interview:

I actually drove to Raleigh and I went to try to advocate. I knew it was a losing battle, because I know how it works. Once the budget's rolled out it's pretty much a done deal. But I still, you know, I met with several legislators, and basically, I showed up to committee meetings and I ambushed them. And I just, I said, "I just want you to know what this means, you know, I want to speak up on behalf of, you know, early colleges and cooperative innovative high schools." And basically, what I got, "I'm so sorry, you know, but it is what it is."

Although that may have been a losing effort, Principal Evette exercised advocacy strategies in other arenas and for other reasons. When she faced staffing issues between her school and the college partner, her response was to advocate. She shared about an issue in which she felt a college partner with whom she worked closely was being mistreated:

I'm not her supervisor, but I stepped up to advocate for her, this is hurting our program because she's not here every day, things are falling through the cracks, and she is—you know, you have an employee that you've had for almost 10 years, at this college, you're not treating her exactly fairly.

When Principal Ashlee was faced with school safety challenges on her college partner campus, she advocated for her staff and students. This advocacy, she shared, jumpstarted the strong two-way communication that she now has with the college partner. This is what she shared as her course of action:

They never did fire drills or lockdowns or, you know, they just didn't do a whole lot of things. I voiced my concerns to the person who's over that in the regular school system and then voiced my concerns to my college partner. Finally, my college partner got someone, they have a head of security who is really a top-notch guy and he consults with me all the time and we are always in the loop, and communication, making sure you've got good communication with all the people at the community college, who you're going to need, that's really, really important, too, and that has improved tremendously over the time I've been here.

**Communication.** When newly appointed principals stepped into a role that they knew little about, they did what made sense—they listened. Principal Nichelle described how she managed to navigate being a first-year principal and new to the EMCHS setting. She stated,

So most things I've just kind of watched and asked a lot of questions and I got that advice from, you know, seasoned people . . . So that's kind of what I've done is I watch and I ask questions and if it needs to be fixed right then like that schedule, then you do, but at the same time, if it's not a burning hole problem, then it's something that I take notes on and kind of research on my own and then go to the school improvement team and say, "Let's look at this. Why is this like this? What's the history behind this? What would be the advantages of changing it? What would be the cons of changing it?"

Similarly, when she was new to the EMCHS principalship, Principal Kimberly also made it a point to listen and learn. When talking about her acclimation to the EMCHS setting, she stated,

I just asked a lot of questions, I am not a very shy person who is afraid to ask, I will ask a question no matter how dumb I think I may be appearing because I need to know the answer. So I asked a lot of questions and I did a lot of listening. Every morning we all sit down and essentially have a staff meeting. My first year here, that was my time to hear what everybody was saying. And I still do that, you know, sometimes, I just kind of sit in there and listen to what it is they are saying, sometimes they're griping about something that I know I can't address right then and there but I put it on the back burner and when I have the opportunity to

address that, I do and fix what that frustrating thing was for that teacher. So that's probably how I overcame my initial challenge of learning the program.

Since having to navigate both the high school and college components proved to be a challenge for principals, it makes sense that establishing positive relationships with college partners would be in EMCHS principals' best interest. Principal Evette has been working through fostering these relationships with consistent communication. She shared,

I've been trying to be more diligent with making more frequent rounds up in the college building, being seen more, I've tried to do a better job of stopping in and saying hello to the dean, and, you know, just sitting down for a few minutes. And usually in the course of our conversation one of us will bring up, "Yeah, did you hear about so and so or such and such?" An issue or, you know, a conflict that is something we really need to discuss, or that she maybe wants to let me know about or I let her know about and it's a chance for us to kind of problem solve for just a minute together. And so I've been trying to be better about that.

In conclusion, I found that in order to navigate the challenges and experiences of the EMCHS principalship, principals demonstrated two specific actions. They took advantage of their peer and district supports. They also built the capacity of their staffs through shared leadership to address the varying challenges and nuances associated with their school settings. Additionally, these principals used effective communication and advocacy skills to manage the demands and nuances specific to their college partner and school district.

### **EMCHS Principals and Culturally Responsive Leadership**

This section consists of the findings related to current and former EMCHS principals' understanding of culturally responsive leadership and how this understanding

influences their practice. Through my analysis of the interview data emerged two themes, which I summarized as “Who Are We?” and “Knowledge is Power.”

### **Who Are We?**

Current and former EMCHS principals understand culturally responsive leadership (CRL) to require a keen understanding of the student populations that they serve and have an openness to the idea that diversity is not limited to race alone. Current and former EMCHS principals understand that there is a relationship between CRL and the type of school environment principals establish. Of the 11 participants in this study, seven stated that they believed they knew the definition of CRL, but only a few could provide a complete explanation of the concept. However, when asked to provide a definition, or their best assumption, all participants were able to articulate some level of knowledge of this leadership term either via general description or through an example of a leadership practice.

**Understanding those whom you serve.** Regardless of the participants’ comfort level with or knowledge of CRL, there was a consistent understanding across interviews that understanding the population one serves is a key component of CRL. In her efforts to define CRL, Principal Kimberly described it simply as, “knowing the kids, knowing what they’re going home to, knowing which ones of our kids that we need to send our social worker to take food to.” When describing her understanding of CRL, Principal Nichelle shared,

I think knowing your population would be the first key. You have to know the students that you’re serving and what you’re looking at for that. And then kind of meet them where they are in response to, you know, the families that you’re



working with on a regular basis . . . but its knowing who's in your building, knowing where they're coming from, and at least trying to address the needs or the specific needs that they have.

Principal Joseph provided an example from his professional experience to help explain the need of knowing the population one serves. He shared,

So for instance, my approaches to creating an instructional culture at the early middle college were completely different than what they were at the middle school because the culture was different, so my response to that was different. Whereas in the middle school, I may have students that come to school late because they were out hunting that morning and lost a coon dog that morning and they had to go find the coon dog before they went home. Transition to the early-middle college, I'm dealing with challenges of we don't have running water. There's nobody at home, so my response how to deal with those challenges have to be different.

Not only did the participating principals demonstrate a knowledge of the students they serve, they also had an understanding of who they were in relation to the students they served. This cultural self-awareness allowed them to express a deep knowledge of and attention to certain student groups. In describing some of her educational experiences prior to being an EMCHS principal, Principal Ashlee stated,

my first position was at XX High School, which is a minority majority school . . . so they said we'd really like for you to stay, so I did just that, I love XX High School . . . I just love the kids there, I just have a passion for the school.

When explaining his attraction to the EMCHS setting, Principal Joseph shared,

throughout my career, I've really tried to focus on African-American males of being a focus for me instructionally, so I felt like that that was an underrepresented population as it related to the type of instruction that they

received. And so I've really tried to focus and hone in on making sure that they got the best shot at education throughout.

**More than just race.** Not only were participating principals aware that having knowledge of the specific populations they served was a key component to CRL, they also understood the importance of capitalizing on students' diversity in a broad sense. In speaking of the current traditional school he leads, Principal Jacob shared,

[Anonymous] High School is very multicultural, very diverse. I got kids from over 58 countries this year. I've had upwards of 66 countries represented here. I feel like it's the United Nations at graduation. But right now, we don't take enough advantage of our multiculturalism.

When describing their understanding of CRL, participants consistently also expressed that they did not limit CRL to only racial diversity. Principal Ashlee spoke of the religious diversity on her EMCHS campus, stating,

I would say probably more than anything it's religion that's probably the thing where there is the most diversity. We have Arab students, we have students who are Muslim, we have Jewish students, we have people who are fundamentalist Christian, and people who are liberal Christian and you get into some areas, there are very different opinions about a whole lot of stuff.

Principal Evette spoke of supporting the primary subgroup at her EMCHS, the economically disadvantaged, when she stated,

that's one of our goals, we want our students to graduate not just from our program and a 4-year [college], if that's what their goal is, but to graduate debt-free or with as little debt as possible, so that's one thing we really push hard for all of our kids.

Principal Evette then went on to explain the accepting and safe environment her school has established for a growing subgroup of students. She mentioned,

we have had an increase in the prevalence of transgender students this year, and I think, again, it's because students feel more comfortable being themselves here, and I appreciate that. I can absolutely support that, because I tell kids all the time, "I just want you to be happy. I want you to be happy, whether you're here or another school. I want you to be happy, because if you're happy, you're more likely to be successful."

**Environment.** Culture and environment are important components of a school's identity. When attempting to explain their understanding of CRL, principals in the study consistently made connections between CRL and a school's environment. Principal Ashlee acknowledged her EMCHS staff's lack of diversity as a factor when considering CRL and her school's environment. She said, "you're gonna look at my staff and we are all lily white, I'll tell you the truth, it's terrible, I mean I look at us all the time, but everybody's here and our kids really love my teachers." Despite the lack of diversity on her staff, Principal Ashlee expressed her understanding of the importance of staff helping to create a respectful environment. She stated,

I think that everyone being respected for who they are and accepted for who they are is extremely important because we're small, we're a family. If you had people who didn't do that you would have a real division in your school. That would not be a positive learning atmosphere.

When describing her EMCHS's culture, Principal Kristyn spoke on the importance of inclusivity. She shared,

I think it's inclusive and we take care of everyone in our building versus just, you know, just a handful of students. It's making sure that we are open, we have our doors open for every type of child, every type of family, and if we can help them with either, you know, language barrier, what have you, we find the resources to be able to do that and being open to learning more and including everyone.

Principal Joseph shared the motto his traditional high school adopted, influenced by his experiences as an EMCHS principal, when explaining the culture of high expectations they are trying to establish:

we just kind of adopted the word “believe” this year, as we believe in every single student that's here, we believe that every student can learn on high levels, we believe that every teacher has the ability to be able to teach on high levels. My personal belief is that every student that walks in the door deserves a chance to be loved and respected and be treated as an individual regardless of what their thoughts and beliefs are.

In all, the current and former EMCHS principals in this study demonstrated a reasonable understanding of CRL. Through their descriptions and explanations, EMCHS principals drew connections between CRL and an understanding of self and the populations they served. Current and former EMCHS principals also expressed that to be culturally responsive leaders in the EMCHS setting, they needed to address more than just the racial demographics of their students. Additionally, participating principals placed a premium on establishing an inclusive and supportive school environment when attempting to be culturally responsive.

### **Knowledge is Power**

This study finds that current and former EMCHS principals' understanding of culturally responsive leadership influences their efforts to meet the specific needs of the

students they serve by providing various opportunities and ensuring an inclusive environment and curriculum. Regardless of the principals' level of understanding of CRL, each participant demonstrated practices that could be considered culturally responsive. The practices of CRL that participants discussed during the interviews in this study were geared largely to ensuring an inclusive and supportive school environment and incorporating an inclusive curriculum.

**Environment.** Through their interview responses, participating principals demonstrated an effort to meet the needs of their student population by establishing and maintaining an inclusive school environment. Principal Ashlee spoke of her school's efforts to celebrate student diversity, noting, "our kids do have the opportunity in all of their classes, really, even in math class, to share their stories and be heard and be celebrated for what's important to them." She added,

We have a whole bunch of different types of clubs and hopefully through our club activities and actually through my teachers, my teachers are celebrating diversity a lot. People are celebrated for being who they are, and I will say that's one other thing about being at an early-middle college, our kids accept each other.

When discussing the steps he took to address the environment at the traditional school he currently leads, Principal Jacob shared, "when I got to [his current] High School we were majority minority as we are now. Five percent of my faculty was minority . . . I've been able to increase our faculty minority membership to over 30% now," explaining the importance he placed on having a staff that matched his student population. With the lack of staff diversity, Principal Jacob shared one of the areas of focus that he established for professional development:

I think the ACEs [adverse childhood experiences] training has helped them a little bit more this current school year . . . we have a lot of families that are struggling here. So talking about adverse childhood experiences has been a good eye-opener as our teachers build that relationship.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are considered to be the most traumatic and negative experiences and events that take place in children's lives that have negative implications on their health and well-being. Examples of ACEs include abuse, maltreatment, and living in harmful environments, just to name a few (Boullier & Blair, 2018). Students in both traditional and EMCHS settings can have these experiences. Therefore, training your staff to help meet these needs is of utmost importance in both settings.

When asked about specific strategies he utilized to meet the needs of his marginalized students, Principal Damon discussed his efforts at creating a safe and inclusive environment for a small group of students of color in his large traditional high school. He shared this experience:

we have focus groups, and I try to meet with my African-American kids, because here, you know, we're 7%. We don't have a lot of minorities, and especially African-American students, so this can be a very lonely place if you're an African-American student. So I try to keep those lines of communication open, because I want to know what they're seeing and what they're feeling . . . I meet with my African-American students, my males usually. I try to do it every quarter . . . They were tired of hearing, "nigger." Not towards them in a bad way, but just hearing it out in the hall. Like the white kids calling each other nigger. "Hey, you're my nigger." They were sick of it, they didn't want to hear that. And that took a big effort. I worked with my student leaders, my student body officers. And again, it wasn't anything specifically put in place, it was a conversation. We opened up a conversation, and that took care of most of it, because most kids don't want to go around offending people.

While this example of CRL takes place in a traditional school setting, it is important to note because it is the experiences and understanding of CRL from Principal Damon's prior EMCHS principalship that has helped to influence his current practices.

Influenced by the needs of the student population he served in his previous role as an EMCHS principal, Principal Joseph shared how he utilizes specific strategies with both students and staff as he attempts to foster positive student-student and student-staff relationships. One activity that he brought with him to his traditional high school from his EMCHS principalship is called Breaking Boundaries, an instrumental CRL strategy. He described it as such:

Breaking Boundaries would start out with students blindfolded, and we would read out different things, and they would have to take a gallery walk and they would do a step forward for everything that related to them. From, you know, you go to sleep at night and hear gun shots, or you come from a single parent home. We would go through the whole list of at-risk characteristics. They would then take off their blindfold, look around, and see where everybody else was. What they realized is that they weren't in situations by themselves. That provided an opportunity where they were able to gel from a brotherhood perspective because it was a all-male entity and so we really developed a lot of brotherhood pieces from there. Created a safer environment where those things were never held against them.

Not only does Principal Joseph understand relationship-building, he is intentional about creating an environment of high expectations for all students. These high expectations were an instrumental part of his EMCHS principalship, so much so that it now influences his current principalship. He shared,

I thought the earlier exposure to colleges and universities and making that more or less like the expectation of, yeah, you're going to college, you just gotta think out what you're going for, so that took out the window of am I going to graduate from

high school, no, the expectation is that you're going to graduate from college, and so when we move the expectation bar, it was like some things became understood, like it's understood that I'm going to graduate from high school. It's understood that I'm going to go to college, but then it was just like a mentality shift for that, now the expectation is that I graduate from college. So I'm creating a culture of high expectations with the other piece.

Again, this culture of high expectations is not limited to any specific school setting; however, it is vital in the EMCHS because of the high percentages of first-generation high school and college graduates, and minorities underrepresented in higher education.

**Curriculum.** To meet the needs of the diverse student populations they served, principals discussed their efforts to create inclusive curricula and instructional practices, whether they be a part of the core academic instruction or extracurricular opportunities. Principal Kimberly described the opportunities that she ensures are provided for her EMCHS students in the following:

our students really share a lot about their different religious beliefs and different cultures. We even have a Cultural Conversations Club, where students get to share about the customs of their culture and where they're from, and what that means to them and we do a lot of that. We're also getting ready to go for global distinction, so we incorporate a lot of global perspectives in our classrooms, in our curriculum.

In discussing how she tries to meet the curricular needs of her EMCHS students, Principal Ashlee mentioned,

We have a math club that tutors math on YouTube in several different languages, because we have kids here who speak different languages. So we actually have the opportunity to do the math lessons. I think we've hit 23 countries so far. So there are opportunities for people to show what they bring to the table, you know, that's really kind of a neat thing to be able to teach somebody math online in your native tongue.



In her interview, Principal Nichelle stressed the importance of really knowing the student population she serves; because of this knowledge, she has been able to develop a plan to meet the needs of an underperforming minority group in her EMCHS. She noted,

So, with our Hispanic population specifically, we just have gone through a data protocol to identify gaps, like a gap analysis, in our academic data to say, “Okay. So where are the gaps?” And we had gaps between overall achievement and Hispanic achievement in two out of three areas. So our school improvement team looked at that and kind of brainstormed, and A, why did we think that, and B, what are we going to do about it? So we have been working on implementing some literacy strategies that focus directly to English language learners or native speakers, bilingual speakers, most of our students are of course native English speakers because they were born here, but there’s still a barrier, so we have really worked on finding strategies, literacy strategies that all of our teachers can incorporate that specifically benefit students who are English language learners.

Along these same lines, Principal Levi made mention that one of his school improvement goals is to support the struggling population of Hispanic students in his EMCHS. He shared,

one of our goals was to increase the number of college credit hours that our Hispanic males were getting. The data showed that our Hispanic males were not passing any of the college classes, so I tried to meet with them and figure out why that is.

While still culturally responsive, Principal Joseph took a different approach when it came to his influence on the school curriculum. In his interview, he discussed the importance of the non-academic curriculum, a curriculum specific to the young men he served at his previous EMCHS. He shared,

Being an all-male school, we taught if you bump into somebody, if somebody bumps into you, you say excuse me, whether it was your fault or not, just to avoid

conflict. Say yes ma'am and no ma'am. Respect others, there's no bullying, like make sure that you arrive to school early, to be early is on time, to be on time is to be late, is kind of like a philosophy of just soft skills that we just kind of try to engrain intentionally, so that whenever they transition they would have those skillsets. When you shake somebody's hand, you look them square dead in the eye, and you give them a firm handshake, and we worked on those things, as a young man, this is how you tie a tie. This is how you dress for an interview. Make sure your belt matches your shoes. Make sure, you know, that you have on a solid colored suit whenever you go for an interview. This is the difference between business professional and business casual, so those were like things that we really intentionally done just to kind of help boost their level of confidence.

These CRL practices are important to note not only because they take place in EMCHS settings, but because they are intentionally put in place to meet the specific needs of each setting. In these examples, principals demonstrated their ability and willingness to focus on the curricular needs of their EMCHS students in relation to race, religion, gender, and language.

To celebrate the diverse learning styles of the students he currently serves and provide access to advanced classes to a more racially and culturally diverse student population, Principal Jacob benefitted from his previous experience leading an EMCHS when he adopted a magnet program within his traditional high school. His intention was to acknowledge the multiple intelligences of all students, and not just those who have been identified as academically gifted in the traditional sense. With much excitement he shared,

High-performing in different types of ways, the beautiful thing is they designed a program, finally, that celebrates all types of intelligences. So I could have a program graduate that never took an AP math in 4 years, that never took an AP science in 4 years. Maybe they did humanities, and they were AP Art 2D, 3D, drawing, art history . . . So finally, we found a way to celebrate everybody, not

just the kid that, you know, that's in AP math, AP science, AP English, AP, you know, social studies. So we're looking at the whole kid now.

Principal Jacob also discussed using school funds to provide students and teachers with more relevant resources to incorporate into the curriculum. He stated,

The English department primarily is the easiest bang for my buck as far as bringing in resources that our kids can see themselves in, they relate to, they have a connection to, not William Shakespeare, which I'm not saying is not great literature.

These examples of culturally responsive leadership take place in the traditional school setting. However, they are important to note because in Principal Jacob's previous role as an EMCHS principal, all of his students had access to honors- and college-level courses regardless of their background or academic history. These EMCHS experiences, he explained, were very influential in the decisions he makes related to culturally responsive leadership as a traditional school principal.

### **Summary**

In conclusion, I found that current and former EMCHS principals understand culturally responsive leadership to be associated with a keen understanding of self as well as the student populations they serve, include CRL practices that address more than just racial diversity, and seek to create inclusive environments. In acting on their understanding of CRL, current and former EMCHS principals were intentional in establishing supportive and inclusive school environments and curricula. Additionally, they offered various opportunities to meet students' diverse needs and they acknowledged and celebrated diversity in the school setting. Importantly, participants

who were current traditional school principals credited many of their CRL practices to their experiences gained during their EMCHS principalships.

### **Observations**

In addition to the data I collected from the initial 11 interviews and three second-round interviews, I conducted three semi-structured observations to get a deeper understanding of the EMCHS principalship. The observations were conducted with Principals Nichelle, Evette, and Joseph. I selected each observation participant based on the information they shared in their initial interviews. Principal Nichelle spoke in-depth about specific CRL practices that I hoped to learn more about during my observation. I selected Principal Evette because of the specific experiences and challenges of which she spoke. I hoped to be able to see these challenges and experiences and how she navigated them. In observing Principal Joseph, I hoped to see firsthand how his experiences as an EMCHS principal have influenced his leadership now that he leads a traditional high school.

While each of the three principals led vastly different schools in very different ways, there were a few commonalities that I noticed during the observations that are worth mentioning. For instance, all three principals maintained a good deal of visibility around campus during the observation visits. I observed all three principals positively and routinely interacting with students, inquiring about their academic progress and needs, and offering encouragement and support. Each principal also interacted with staff members, discussed instruction, and addressed immediately the various needs and

concerns with which they were presented. In the next three subsections, I describe the details of each of the observations I conducted.

### **Principal Nichelle—Culturally Responsive Leadership in an EMCHS Setting**

My time spent observing Principal Nichelle was very helpful in uncovering the EMCHS principalship experiences. I was able to spend 3 hours with her, shadowing her around campus. During this time, she gave me a tour around the school. We went into several classrooms. In each classroom, she engaged in positive interactions with a handful of students. She would often look over students' shoulders and ask them questions about what they were working on. In one of classrooms we visited, Principal Nichelle had an extensive conversation with the teacher. They discussed the issues they were currently experiencing with the math curriculum and how it would need to be changed prior to the next school year. In another classroom Principal Nichelle had a private conversation with a student regarding their graduation status. She offered some words of encouragement to the student. Anytime we saw students in the halls or walking around campus, Principal Nichelle made sure to stop and speak to them. She would simply ask them how they were doing or provide them with words or wisdom or encouragement. Whenever I observed Principal Nichelle in the main office area, I noticed that there were many people, both staff and students, trying to get her attention and speak with her about various topics. There was also a conversation she had privately with a student while I sat and waited outside of her office.

Before the conclusion of my visit with Principal Nichelle, I was able to sit in on a staff professional development session that addressed the school's efforts in supporting

their English Language Learners (ELL). During this session, they reviewed classroom walkthrough data collected on Hispanic student engagement. In her opening, Principal Nichelle set the tone for this meeting by sharing and reminding the staff of the significant performance gaps between the Hispanic and non-Hispanic students at their school. In fact, she added that these performance gaps would be the focus for their school improvement team, and that there would be specific goals written into the school improvement plan to address these gaps. Principal Nichelle urged her staff to improve, stating, “we must dig deeper to make our SIP worth something. We need to find more funds and resources to help with achieving goals. Anyone have any questions?” Principal Nichelle was not the facilitator of the staff meeting and PD session, however, she was an active participant and contributor.

A teacher leader from the staff led the PD session, sharing what she learned from a workshop that she attended on best practices for supporting ELL students. During her time in front of the staff, the teacher leader facilitated several activities designed to place the staff in the educational shoes of their ELL students. After the teacher leader presented, a contracted representative from a popular consulting company that provides services to EMCHSs came and shared data that she had collected over 2 previous days of classroom observations at the school. The consultant shared with the staff the data she collected on their Hispanic vs. non-Hispanic student engagement in the classroom. After presenting this data, she facilitated an “I notice, I wonder” activity based on trends and patterns teachers identified within the data. The staff had an opportunity to discuss these patterns and trends in small groups, and then as a whole staff.

Before concluding the data session, the consultant led a staff discussion, posing and addressing the following questions:

- What is the correlation between student participation and student achievement?
- Are the right data being collected?
- What is the correlation between subject areas and Hispanic student engagement?
- Do Hispanic females feel inferior in STEM classes?
- How would engagement levels compare between native and non-native speakers, instead of All Hispanics vs. non-Hispanic students?

The faculty paused before responding. They acknowledged that there is in fact a correlation between student participation and student performance, and that the collection of this type of data was important in helping them think about ways to better meet the needs of their Hispanic students. They also noticed that there existed higher levels of Hispanic student engagement in certain courses, and that there was a gender difference in engagement as well. The staff then told the consultant that they were interested in collecting data on native vs non-native speakers, which the consultant agreed would be a helpful data point.

After the staff meeting was over, I asked Principal Nichelle why she felt it was necessary to address the needs of her Hispanic students instead of focusing on the entire student body. She replied,

Focusing on our Hispanic population is focusing on our school. We are a family, and when one group of students struggles, we all struggle. Many of our Hispanic students face situations that their peers don't experience, these sometimes can be a hurdle to their success. It's our job to help them get over those hurdles.

Principal Nichelle's practices provided a practical example of a key theme from the interviews. Specifically, current and former EMCHS principals' understanding of culturally responsive leadership influences their efforts to meet the needs of the students they serve by ensuring an inclusive environment and curriculum. In this case, the professional development and data analysis session that Principal Nichelle helped organize demonstrated how EMCHS principals like her understand and operationalize CRL in their settings. In this particular case, Principal Nichelle did more than just speak about the importance of CRL. Instead, she accessed her human and financial resources to support the specific needs of a group of underperforming, minoritized students.

### **Principal Evette—Challenges and Experiences of EMCHS Principalship**

Navigating the relationship between the school district and college partner proved to be a common experience and challenge for EMCHS principals. In her initial interview, Principal Evette spoke passionately about this experience and how it impacted her leadership in the EMCHS setting. The necessity of managing the relationship between two institutions, she explained, made the EMCHS principalship more complex. Interested to learn more about how Principal Evette managed the relationship, I decided to conduct an observation of her on her campus.

The 3 hours I spent observing Principal Evette provided me with a considerable amount of insight into the EMCHS principalship. During our time together, Principal



Evette walked me around her entire campus, explaining various components of her school program. Before leaving the front office, Principal Evette stopped to check in with her office support. Her school treasurer was handling the collection of money for an upcoming fieldtrip. The office support displayed a level of frustration with the current fieldtrip process. Principal Evette quickly offered some humoring words and reminded her treasurer that the field trip process would be over very soon.

While with Principal Evette, I observed her during lunch as she helped her staff in the supervision of their students. We walked back and forth between the makeshift cafeteria and outside student eating areas. During this time, Principal Evette spoke to as many students as she could, addressing each of them by name or nickname. She also made it a point to introduce me to every staff member with whom she spoke. During lunch duty, several teachers came to her with questions and concerns about the upcoming fieldtrip. Once lunch was over, she took me to a small room on campus that, through the support of her parent group, she was able to turn into a media center. She was very proud of this makeshift media center, especially since her campus does not offer her one.

A great deal of the time I spent on her campus, I observed Principal Evette interacting with the staff of her college partner. Their conversations revolved around the EMCHS students, their performance, and their needs. For instance, she spoke on two different occasions with college professors who shared positive news about current and previous students and their academic performance. While both occasions were impromptu and initiated by the professors, the length of the conversations and rapport

between Principal Evette and the professors led me to believe that these types of encounters happened frequently. She confirmed that later in our follow-up interview.

During my time on campus, Principal Evette walked me to the main college building where I observed her meeting with the college's office support staff. This too was a common practice of hers. She engaged the college staff in discussions about campus activities and how best to ensure her EMCHS students could participate. Through observing these conversations, it was evident that Principal Evette had an established and positive relationship with these particular college staff members. Prior to leaving the main college building, Principal Evette and I made a stop to the college liaison's office for a quick introduction. However, Principal Evette ended up engaging in another conversation with a college staff member down the hall, leaving me alone with the liaison. The time I spent speaking with the liaison was very beneficial in my search to understand the relationship Principal Evette had with the college partner. The liaison spoke of a collaborative and cooperative relationship between the EMCHS and college staffs. She gave credit to the constant communication and positive relationship that had been formed between the college and Principal Evette.

Every quarter, Principal Evette participates in a formal meeting with staff from both her district office and college partner. This meeting was scheduled to take place during my observation; however, the meeting was canceled due to a scheduling conflict. Although the meeting would be postponed, Principal Evette shared that the meeting agenda included EMCHS updates from her, college class concerns from the college partner, student concerns from the liaison, and the growth and promotion of the College

and Career Promise program from the district office. During the observation, I asked Principal Evette if she felt this quarterly meeting was helpful. She responded,

Absolutely! These meetings give me the opportunity to make sure everyone is on the same page. Before we decided to meet, I always felt like I was in the middle, and being pulled by central office and the college. Now, not only do I have a strong relationship with each side, but there is a good relationship between the two of them. This makes things a lot easier for me. I suggest all EMCHS principals hold these types of meetings.

Even in the absence of the formal meeting, observing Principal Evette gave me a better understanding of the influence the relationship between EMCHS principals and their college partner has on leading in the EMCHS setting. When analyzing this observation data, I noticed a distinct connection to the following theme of navigating the different demands and nuances of the school district and college partner is a unique experience and often challenges EMCHS principals. My observation data from my visit with Principal Evette also connected to the theme that EMCHS principals consistently utilize advocacy and communication strategies to navigate the specific nuances associated with both their college partner and school district. Principal Evette's constant visits and discussions with college partner staff and the standing meeting between her and district and college partner leadership symbolize the investments she makes in helping manage the relationship between two educational institutions.

### **Principal Joseph—EMCHS Influence on Traditional School Principalship**

During the first-round interview of Principal Joseph, a traditional school principal, he spoke of the various ways in which his EMCHS principal experiences had influenced his leadership in his current setting. More specifically, he described several CRL

practices that he implements in his current school, all of which were influenced by his work in the EMCHS setting. While my observation in the traditional school setting did not provide insight on the EMCHS principalship in a general sense, it did in fact help to highlight the ways in which EMCHS principals are culturally responsive leaders, and how that leadership can have influences even in the traditional setting. With Principal Joseph being a traditional school principal who has EMCHS principal experience, it was my hope to observe CRL practices and other specific influences from the EMCHS setting that could be identified in his leadership of a traditional school setting.

I spent a little over 3 hours with Principal Joseph; most of the time we spent walking the hallways and supervising the cafeteria during lunch. Before leaving the main office on our way to the cafeteria, Principal Joseph stopped to joke and interact with a student he saw waiting in the office. He also addressed the office staff with a few humorous remarks before heading down the hall. Walking down the hall, we stopped two more times, and Principal Joseph was laughing and joking with teachers at each stop. The bell rang for a class transition while we were in the hallway, and during the entire transition, Principal Joseph interacted with his students, joking, encouraging, supporting, and calling each student by name or nickname. While in the cafeteria, I observed many of the same interactions between the principal and his staff and students. After lunch, we went back into the halls, again interacting with staff and students. My entire visit was spent in the hallways and cafeteria, observing Principal Joseph's positive relationships with his staff and students.

During my time observing Principal Joseph, I witnessed the type of positive relationship building as well as an encouraging, supportive, and caring school environment that one would think could only be attained in a small school setting like an EMCHS. Walking around the building with Principal Joseph was like walking around with a celebrity. Both staff and students seemed to all flock to the principal and jockey for his attention. During my time observing him, Principal Joseph spent the vast majority of his time in the halls and cafeteria interacting with students in genuine conversations around behavior, academics, and personal interests. Principal Joseph's observed interactions included him respectfully addressing inappropriate language between students, joking and laughing with staff and students, the hugging of several students, hurrying tardy student to class, encouraging staff to pursue leadership opportunities, engaging in instructional conversations with staff about science scheduling and plans for next steps to improve test scores, and offering support to a student he noticed was feeling sad.

Principal Joseph explained that he had a mentoring program in the EMCHS that he used to lead. This program provided each student with a coach who would serve as a personal support and accountability partner. Every staff member was assigned a group of students that they were to check in with on a weekly basis at the very least. These check-ins were designed to build positive and supportive relationships between staff and students. While observing Principal Joseph, I was able to see the implementation of this mentoring program firsthand in a traditional high school. Throughout my time at the school, I witnessed Principal Joseph check in with all eight of the mentees assigned to

him. During these check-ins, he would ask: “What are you struggling with?”; “What are your grades like?”; “What can I do for you?”; “Have you found a job yet?”; and “Can we discuss a plan for improving your grades?” From the positive relationships and candid responses I observed, I could tell that this was a practice that Principal Joseph had engaged in regularly, and not just for show during the observation.

The data collected during Principal Joseph’s observation directly supports the theme from the interviews that understanding CRL influences EMCHS principals’ efforts to meet the specific needs of the students they serve by ensuring an inclusive environment and curriculum. The major takeaway from my observation was the amount of intentionality Principal Joseph placed on building a positive relationship with students and staff. These relationships helped to establish an inclusive and supportive school culture. During our time together, I asked Principal Joseph specifically about the influence that the EMCHS principalship had on his day-to-day leadership in the traditional setting. He responded,

Building relationships, getting the kids outside of school, making sure that students are empowered and that they’re seen, making sure that you let them know that regardless of where they are that there’s a plan, a way to kind of come through, so I think like the biggest part is just the relationships and the conversations of who are you, what’s going on, how can I help, just kind of create some level of—it really just creates a level of family, honestly.

My observation of Principal Joseph allowed me to see another example of CRL.

Additionally, I noticed the influences EMCHS practices can have on the traditional school principalship.

**Summary**

The data I collected from all three observations proved to help me uncover the unique aspects of the EMCHS principalship. They provided an in-depth look at CRL practices and the navigation of the college partner relationships, two major components of the EMCHS principalship. The observations of both Principal Nichelle and Principal Joseph provided a look at CRL practices. Although both principals practice CRL, they do so in varying ways. Principal Nichelle's focus was more instructional, and the CRL practices I observed were geared towards establishing an inclusive curriculum that met the specific needs of her Hispanic student population. Principal Joseph's approach was more focused on relationship building and establishing an inclusive and supportive school environment.

Principal Evette's observation provided me insight into how EMCHS principals manage the relationships between their school district and college partner. Her observation highlighted the relationship building and cooperation needed to navigate both educational settings. Principal Evette's observation was a clear depiction of how EMCHS principals leverage effective communication skills to manage having to serve two masters. Because of these three observations, we have a better understanding of the components of the EMCHS principalship.

**Chapter Summary**

With well over 20 hours of data collection, there was a lot to be learned about the EMCHS principalship. Participants in this study were candid about their experiences as EMCHS principals, sharing the challenges and benefits of the setting. Through the data

collection processes, we also found how EMCHS principals navigate these experiences and challenges. Navigating the different demands of the school district and college partner is a unique experience and often challenges EMCHS principals. Also, EMCHS principals consistently utilize advocacy and communication strategies to navigate the specific nuances associated with both their college partner and school district. Additionally, this study found how current and former EMCHS principals understand CRL and how that understanding informs their leadership practices.

The findings of this study inform us that being the only administrator in the building and/or EMCHS principal in the district adds unique experiences and challenges to the EMCHS principalship. Principals expressed a feeling of professional loneliness in this position. Without administrative teams to bounce ideas off of, or to share managerial responsibilities with, EMCHS principals found themselves wearing multiple hats of different responsibilities. EMCHS principals took on many roles not usually associated with the principalship, such as driving school buses, teaching classes, cleaning their facilities, and fulfilling school nursing and social work responsibilities. However, it was through shared and distributive leadership practices and the establishment of peer and district supports that EMCHS principals navigated this professional isolation. They built and leveraged the leadership capacity of their staff and others to address the specific needs of the EMCHS setting.

Having to serve two masters—meeting the requirements and demands of both their college partner and school district—was another common experience that often challenged EMCHS principals. Principals discussed these vexing experiences when it



came to the relationship maintained with both educational settings. Many of these challenges dealt with facilities, being forgotten and overlooked, attaining resources, conflicting priorities, and school accountability. Navigating the different demands of the school district and college partner was primarily done through effective communication and advocacy. Principals were very intentional about establishing positive relationships with and between their college partner and school district. At the same time, they advocated for the needs of their students and schools.

EMCHS principals expressed that there was a common misconception among those outside of the EMCHS setting that the EMCHS principalship was an easy job with minimal if any challenges due to the small size and student population of the schools. EMCHS principals argued that there were challenges associated with their roles. I found that the small sizes of their schools coupled with their target student population served as both a benefit and a challenge. Principals expressed the difficulty of meeting the many needs of their target student population (minority, first-generation graduate, at risk of dropping out, impoverished) with their limited staffs. Despite the size of their staffs, EMCHS principals were intentional about being culturally responsive in addressing the needs of their EMCHS students.

The data from this study inform us that current and former EMCHS principals understand culturally responsive leadership requires them to possess a keen understanding of the student populations in which they serve and not to focus on racial diversity alone. Current and former EMCHS principals also understand that there is a relationship between CRL and the type of school environment principals establish. This

understanding of CRL influences EMCHS principals' efforts to meet the specific needs of the students they serve by ensuring an inclusive environment and curriculum. CRL practices participants used included various efforts to support students from poverty, focus on Hispanic student performance, access to advanced course work for all, intentional relationship building, maintaining staff diversity, and staff development on adverse childhood experiences.

In the fifth and final chapter of this dissertation, I take the analyzed findings and connect them to the original research questions of this study. I also make a connection between the study's findings and the current and emerging literature on the principalship and the EMCHS setting. Chapter V is divided into sections that address each of the themes that emerged from the data collection process. In the chapter, I also discuss implications and recommendations. I conclude with a reflection on how this study relates to my own work as a K-12 school leader.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **ANALYSIS**

I designed this research study to take an in-depth look at the principalship in the Early/Middle College High School (EMCHS) setting. More specifically, I sought to answer three specific questions:

1. What are the challenges and experiences of early/middle college high school principals?
2. How do early/middle college high school principals navigate these challenges and experiences?
3. How do current and former early/middle college high school principals understand the meaning of culturally responsive leadership and how does it influence their practice?

To answer these questions, I employed a qualitative research approach involving 11 principals from six school districts across North Carolina. The study included both semi-structured interviews and semi-structured observations. Each of the 11 study participants were acting principals; seven were Early/Middle College High School principals and four were former EMCHS principals currently leading in a traditional school setting. All 11 participated in an initial round of interviews, and three principals participated in a second-round interview and observation.

In this chapter I analyze my findings and discuss implications of my study, recommendations for future research, and my personal reflections. First, as a means of analysis, I connect my findings to the literature reviewed in Chapter II. Next, toward implications, I provide suggestions for college and university principal preparation programs, district leadership and EMCHS principal supervisors, and principals new to the EMCHS setting. I also discuss the influences EMCHS experiences have in the traditional school setting. Lastly, I share my recommendations for future research on the EMCHS principalship and then conclude the chapter with a personal reflection on the study.

### **Analysis of Findings**

Regardless of a school's size, type, student population, or location, being a principal is no easy task. However, because of their unique structures, components, and student populations, many people outside of the Early/Middle College High School setting believe that leading these schools is a "walk in the park." Without having a clear and true understanding of the EMCHS setting and principalship, it is difficult to support school leaders when they step into this unique role. In this research study I took a close look at the EMCHS principalship. Based on my findings, I argue that these principals navigate a variety of experiences and challenges that are unique to their setting.

Additionally, I maintain that regardless of EMCHS principals' level of understanding of culturally responsive leadership, these principals demonstrate CRL practices when leading their schools. In this analysis of finding section I have three subsections, one for each of my three research questions. In each of these subsections, I connect the themes that emerged from the data to the literature reviewed in Chapter II.

### Research Question 1

*What are the challenges and experiences of early/middle college high school principals?*

After the data collection process, I found that being the only administrator in the building and/or EMCHS principal in the district adds unique experiences and challenges to the EMCHS principalship. Additionally, navigating the different demands of the school district and college partner proved to be a unique experience and often challenged EMCHS principals. School size was also a factor that influenced the EMCHS principals. Participants disputed the idea that the small size of their schools, coupled with their target student population, served only as a benefit; there are in fact both benefits and challenges associated with the size and populations of these settings.

**Lone ranger.** Current research suggests that the principalship in general can feel like a lonely and isolated position. This feeling of “professional loneliness” is particularly true for first-year and novice principals (Lochmiller, 2014; Spillane & Lee, 2013; Walker et al., 2003). When discussing the unique experiences and challenges of the EMCHS principalship, principals in my study expressed a similar feeling of loneliness. In fact, in her interview, Principal Kristyn stated, “I’m gonna tell you, like my first year, yeah it was lonely a little bit . . . It’s like man, who do I talk to about such-and-such.” The loneliness experienced in the EMCHS principalship is associated with being the only administrator in their buildings and/or EMCHS principal in the district. As Principal Jacob put it, “You know, because your middle college, again, you’ve got it all on you. It’s your shoulders. There is no AP, you know, there is no AP to walk through this and that with.”

Helf (2012) describes the many responsibilities that principals have, including human resources, instructional, managerial, vision setting, and community building. Similarly, being the only administrator in a small school setting such as an EMCHS calls for principals to be skilled multitaskers as well, as they wear several hats to ensure their schools run effectively. Lochmiller (2014) discusses the isolation and frustration that many principals experience when transitioning to the principalship as they discover the many expectations and responsibilities they inherited. Likewise, the principals in my study shared these same feelings as they served as bus drivers, teachers, and janitors, among other roles in their EMCHS setting. Several principals described the challenge of fulfilling roles that many traditional principals do not experience, and others shared their frustrations with being “forgotten about” by their school districts. EMCHS principals explained their need to find internal support from both peers and supervisors who are familiar with the EMCHS setting. These collective experiences around the loneliness and isolation of the EMCHS principalship is what Hill (2017) coins the “Unicorn Effect.”

**Serving two masters.** A unique component of the EMCHS setting is that these schools are physically situated on the campuses of their college partners. This dynamic adds to the experiences and challenges of the EMCHS principalship, as principals attempt to navigate the differing demands and nuances of two masters: their school district and college partner. Research such as Rousmaniere (2013) describes the complexity of the principalship in general and highlights the premium that is placed on the proper management of relationships, both internal and external. When leadership changes, sometimes priorities and agendas do as well. For EMCHS principals, changes in district

and/or college partner leadership can have major implications on the relationship between the two. Establishing a positive relationship with and between both entities was of the utmost priority for EMCHS principals. When discussing these types of relationships, Principal Evette explained,

I guess the groups of people I get to work with are most influential. Because you know at the traditional school obviously I wouldn't have a whole other entity that I was collaborating with, you know, the college folks, and you know, I've tried to build those relationships, so I do know names. When I first got here, I know I really struggled with who was who. I know we're a small campus, but you know I didn't necessarily work with the college folks every day, but definitely working with a whole other group in a collaborative effort is very important.

While the EMCHS principalship involves many of the same complexities as traditional principalships, the added factor of managing and balancing the needs and demands of both the college partner and school district is a challenge that EMCHS principals face on a continual basis (Hill, 2017).

**Size does matter.** The leading misconception about the EMCHS principalship is that it is a much less challenging role because these schools typically serve only the “smart” and “good” students and have small staffs and student populations. Principal Jacob’s description of this misconception was that, “It’s easy. You’re not stressed, you don’t have the stress that I have . . . I know that all those middle colleges, they must just cherry pick kids, they have the easy kids.” Frustrated by this misconception, the principals in this study assert that the student populations they serve and the size of their schools do in fact have challenges associated with them. McKoy (2012) declared that principals who need to focus on learning for all subgroups, especially racial and ethnic

minorities, economically disadvantaged, and ELL students, have extremely difficult jobs. Considering the specific populations EMCHSs serve, Principal Jacob stated, “at the time, in our first couple of graduating classes, we probably had over 85% of our kids who were the first high school graduates in their families.” Principal Evette added, “We usually have—we have a lot of emotional needs here, which really seen an increase lately. We have one to two students who’ll come in during the day at some point, usually young ladies, but crying, very beside themselves.” Being careful not to focus on just challenges, participating principals also shared the benefits with leading in their unique small school settings. These benefits are supported by Merchant’s (2011) research which suggests that small school settings, such as the EMCHS, are more likely than comprehensive schools to foster an intimate and personalized learning environment for students.

***EMCHS student populations.*** All of the participating principals expressed a great deal of love and passion in serving their particular student populations; however, none of them described their schools as serving only the “good” and “smart” students, as suggested in countless misconceptions. I found that EMCHS principals remained true to their school purposes and targeted populations. When asked if her school serves the target EMCHS population and meets the original purpose, Principal Kristyn added,

Absolutely! We’re serving the kids to the best of our ability, you know, with the factors we work in with in terms of serving at-risk students, minorities, underrepresented students, and kids that need that academic challenge, and we’re doing that.

Principals of EMCHSs specifically sought out minority, economically disadvantaged, and first-generation college students who had the potential to take college



classes while in high school. This is supported by the research of Le and Frankfort (2011) and Edmunds (2012), which describe the EMCHS student populations as at risk of dropping out of high school for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to those mentioned by the participating principals. There exists a body of research which insists that poverty has been a serious issue in public education, regardless of the setting (Kantor & Brenzel, 1992; Peck, 2017; Wilson, 2012). The challenges associated with serving students of color who live in poverty can have major implications on high-stakes testing and accountability (McKoy, 2012). Aside from school accountability, many students from poverty come to school with significant physical, mental, emotional, and personal needs (West et al., 2010). The participating principals argued that there existed challenges associated with meeting the many non-instructional needs of the student populations they served.

Research would suggest that because of the populations EMCHSs serve, a level culturally responsive leadership is required (Khalifa et al., 2016). EMCHS principals can more effectively address the needs of their student populations through positive relationship building. For example, Principal Joseph shared,

we have been able to develop champions here to where we each have a small core group that we work it with, and then I even work with four or five students frequently that we kind of touch base with and make sure that they're on track. Make sure we communicate with parents. Make sure we follow up with them about their grades, so on and so forth.

Existing research suggests that the cultivation of authentic, positive staff-student relationships and strong school-community building are examples of culturally

responsive leadership practices (Brown, 2007). In my study I found that EMCHS principals take advantage of their small school sizes and leverage these same CRL practices to meet the many needs of their student populations. EMCHS principals expressed the importance of establishing a school climate that encourages positive relationship building, which is in line with the findings of Bloom and Unterman (2013). Additionally, current literature suggests that schools that foster these positive relationships experience high levels of academic and social success (Bloom & Unterman, 2013; Merchant, 2011). This comes as no surprise as the research surrounding EMCHSs describe them as effective, high achieving settings (Clagett & Barrett, 2017; Cooper, 2011; DiMaria, 2013; Killough, 2009).

*Small school setting.* Principals in this study expressed the challenges associated with running a small school, describing their feelings of loneliness and the many hats they wear as the leader. They also, however, described the small size of the EMCHS as a gift and a curse when considering some of the positive experiences associated with leading EMCHS settings. Regardless of the setting, one of the many roles and responsibilities of a principal is being a strong instructional leader. In the research on practices of effective school principals, maintaining an extreme focus on teaching and learning was a common theme, and often at the top of the list (Cosner & Jones, 2016; Garza et al., 2014; Stevens, 2008).

EMCHS principals stated that a benefit of their small school size was their increased ability to be instructional leaders. When comparing the EMCHS and traditional school principalships, Principal Daniel stated,

I think the biggest difference I found it was so much easier to get in classrooms at the middle college, so I think your—at least comparing, you know, the middle college I was at and this setting, I was able to be a—more of an instructional leader, you know, at the middle college than a day here. I spend much more time in the traditional school dealing with discipline than I ever did at the middle college.

Because of the smaller number of teachers to support and decreased volume of managerial duties such as student discipline, EMCHS principals have an opportunity to focus larger parts of their day and energy on being instructional leaders. This finding is supported by the growing body of research on small school settings that suggest principals have more instructional autonomy than their comprehensive school counterparts, and thus should be able to positively impact teaching and learning for all groups of students. This usually serves as a determining factor in many districts' decisions to convert comprehensive schools into small school settings (Allen & Steinberg, 2004; Haynes, 2011; Peters, 2011).

## **Research Question 2**

*How do early/middle college high school principals navigate these challenges and experiences?*

Not only did I uncover the unique experiences and challenges of the EMCHS principalship, I also paid close attention to how principals navigate these experiences and challenges. Through the data collection process, I found that EMCHS principals take advantage of peer and district supports and utilize shared and distributive leadership practices to navigate the challenges and experiences associated with the EMCHS setting. I also discovered that EMCHS principals consistently utilize advocacy and

communication strategies in order to navigate the specific nuances associated with serving two masters.

**Strength in numbers.** EMCHS principals are often the only administrators in their building, and often, their districts. This leaves them with a multitude of roles and responsibilities to fill, and no one with whom to collaborate, problem-solve, or bounce ideas off of. To navigate the professional isolation that is associated with the EMCHS principalship, principals in my study created professional networks of principals in similar roles, took advantage of district office supports, and practiced shared and distributive leadership. Research suggests that due to the unique workloads of small school principals, shared and distributive leadership has become a priority. Engaging staff in the management of the school and decision-making processes proves to be a common practice for small school principals (Stevens, 2008). Similar to the practices demonstrated by principals in my study, the current literature on small school models characterizes principals as collaborative, empowering, and distributive (Haynes, 2011; Hill, 2017; Stevens, 2008).

**Let's talk.** Managing the demands of both their district leadership and college partners proved to be a unique experience that challenged EMCHS principals. In order to navigate this experience, principals in this study used advocacy and communication strategies as appropriate. Whether it was to fight for monetary or human resources, to support the needs of students, or to provide an understanding of their unique setting, EMCHS principals demonstrated a consistent trend of advocating for their schools and communities. When Principal Kimberly spoke of being consistently forgotten by her

school district due to her school having a different calendar, she stated in frustration, “so I, yeah, I’ve been pretty respectfully loud about the fact that we need to be considered because we are serving students in this district as well.” Because they were often stuck in the middle of both entities, EMCHS principals performed advocacy to both their district offices and college partner leaders. I found that it is through constant communication and relationship-building efforts that EMCHS principals were effective in advocating to their various school stakeholders. Research on small schools suggests that this type of strong communication, along with collaborative leadership skills, are preferred qualities of superintendents who hire principals for such settings (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009).

### **Research Question 3**

*How do current and former early/middle college high school principals understand the meaning of culturally responsive leadership and how does it influence their practice?*

Current and former EMCHS principals in this study comprehend culturally responsive leadership to require a keen understanding of the student populations they serve, and not to be limited to racial diversity alone. Current and former EMCHS principals understand that there is a relationship between CRL and the type of school environment principals establish. This understanding of CRL influences current and former EMCHS principals’ efforts to meet the specific needs of the students they serve by providing various opportunities and ensuring an inclusive environment and curriculum.

**Who are we?** There is a body of research that suggests that Critical Self-Awareness, Culturally Responsive Curricula and Teacher Preparation, Culturally Responsive and Inclusive School Environments, and Engaging Students and Parents in Community Contexts are the major components of culturally responsive leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016). The findings of my study largely support the theories set forth by Khalifa et al. (2016). When defining or describing CRL, current and former EMCHS principals examined their own personal purposes and passions and sought to understand the student populations they served. Principal Ashlee spoke about her passion for serving particular student groups, stating,

my first position was at [anonymous] High School, which is a minority majority school . . . so they said we'd really like for you to stay, so I did because I love XX High School. I mean I do, I started a key club there, I just love the kids there, I just have a passion for the school.

EMCHS principals also placed a premium on creating and maintaining inclusive school environments, engaging parents as partners in the educational process, and ensuring culturally responsive curriculum and opportunities.

***Understanding those whom you serve.*** According to current research, CRL cannot exist absent a principal's critical self-awareness and understanding of their personal values in regard to serving marginalized and minoritized student groups (Khalifa et al., 2016; Taliaferro, 2011). In concert with the basic foundational philosophy of CRL, the principals in my study each communicated a passion and purpose for serving their EMCHS students. Not only did participating principals demonstrate critical self-awareness, but they also acknowledged and celebrated the diversity in their schools.

When school principals acknowledge race and culture within their schools, they tend to be far more effective than those who claim to be “color-blind” (McIver et al., 2009).

Principal Nichelle shared an example of how their school started to build authentic relationships through getting to know and better understand their students and families:

So, at the beginning of every year we typically bring in 80 freshmen and we do home visits for every freshman. We take them a little goody bag that has just some early college gear or SWAG. It has just different things in it and it’s more of an “it’s nice to meet you, tell us a little bit about yourself, how has your summer been, we brought you this bag, are you excited about coming.”

Knowledge of the student populations they serve allows EMCHS principals to establish inclusive and supportive school environments. Taliaferro (2011) and Johnson (2007) suggest that cultivating a school environment where students feel included and valued is of utmost importance.

*More than just race.* When discussing their approaches to culturally responsive leadership, principals in this study demonstrated an awareness and desire to meet the needs of the multiple diversities, not just racial diversity, within their school. Principal Evette expressed her school’s focus on meeting the specific needs of her students of poverty. She stated,

I mentioned the food pantry. We have a clothing cabinet that we use as well. We have different clothes. I know my first year here, there was a store going out of business and they let us get a ton of the merchandise. I had almost a pair of shoes for every kid here. A brand-new pair.

Research on CRL acknowledges student religion, gender, sexuality, and economic status as additional factors that lead to marginalization of students in schools (Khalifa et al.,

2016). EMCHS principals understand that race, while important, is not the only factor they must turn their CRL efforts towards.

**Knowledge is power.** Khalifa et al. (2016) suggest that teachers and principals alike should feel compelled to make constant changes to their teaching and leadership practices in order to positively shape the climate of the school while meeting the many needs of the students they serve. This study found that current and former EMCHS principals intentionally practiced CRL to influence their schools' environments and provide students with culturally responsive curricular opportunities.

**Environment.** Participating principals spoke of school practices that celebrated student diversity. They provided students with opportunities to share their backgrounds and personal stories, and created clubs, extra-curricular opportunities, and student support groups. They considered these approaches to be aligned with the idea of culturally responsive leadership. Gordon and Ronder (2016) identify these and other inclusive practices as main priorities in CRL. Current and former EMCHS principals made efforts to hire diverse faculty and staff and to build the culturally responsive capacity of their existing personnel in order to develop an inclusive and supportive school environment for students. Khalifa et al. (2016) argue that school leaders should provide their students with culturally responsive faculty who are capable of meeting the diverse needs of students of color who live in poverty. To build the culturally responsive capacity of their faculty and staffs, several principal participants spoke of providing professional learning opportunities geared toward meeting the specific needs of particular student groups. The research on CRL suggests that it is necessary for principals to provide faculty and staff



with professional learning opportunities that foster a critical consciousness and cultural awareness in staff, regardless of the staffs' economic status, race, and religion (Ahram et al., 2011; Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Guerra & Nelson, 2008; Khalifa et al., 2016; Vincent et al., 2011). Current and former EMCHS principals also mentioned parent engagement efforts when providing examples of their CRL. Principal Kristyn shared her school's mindset and practice around parental engagement, stating that

families come in, it's a family meeting because guess what, we're a part of your village and your child is a part of ours, so us working together, we really help parents kind of work through the educational process and knowing what's best for kids.

In the research on small school principals, Ishimaru (2013) and Johnson (2007) suggest that creating opportunities for shared leadership, building positive relationships, and empowering parents is a common theme among culturally responsive principals.

***Curriculum.*** When considering the CRL practices they implemented within their schools, participants gave examples of multicultural class activities, global perspectives entwined into instruction, multilingual tutoring sessions, and major shifts in classroom engagement practices. Brown (2007) explains that there was once a time when minority students were not acknowledged for their diversity and had to conform to the educational norms of White Americans. However, EMCHS principals have intentionally embraced the diversity of their students and put in place structures and policies that support their students. Research suggests that culturally responsive teaching makes school curricula more multicultural and nurtures and supports students' cultural competence (Johnson, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

### **Implications**

I designed this research study to examine the EMCHS principalship and to gain an understanding of the unique experiences and challenges that are associated with the position. Additionally, in this study I sought to identify the specific strategies that EMCHS principals utilize to navigate their experiences and challenges. Finally, I was intentional in uncovering current and former EMCHS principals' understanding of CRL, and how this understanding influences their roles as educational leaders. Since EMCHSs are a relatively new school reform model, the body of literature on these institutions is limited. The majority of research on EMCHSs is associated primarily with the structures and success of these settings.

This research study contributes to the limited but growing body of literature specific to the EMCHS principalship. Since EMCHSs can be considered as a subset of the small school model, the litany of research on small school settings, their structures, successes, and principalship provided me important initial insight into the EMCHS principalship. While small school and EMCHS settings share several similarities, it would be a mistake to simplify EMCHS as just another type of small school. Through the findings in this research study, I argue that EMCHSs are more complex than the typical small school. They also have structures and components that are not present in any other school setting. Additionally, my research helps counter the misconception that the EMCHS principalship is a less challenging role than that of the principal of a traditional high school. Instead, my study suggests that the EMCHS principalship is no easier or harder than the traditional principalship, just different. Principal participants from my

study who have led in both EMCHS and traditional settings support the notion that the EMCHS principalship is filled with unique experiences and challenges that are not often present in traditional high schools, and vice versa.

Based on the findings from my research study, I also suggest that, regardless of their ability to eloquently define the concept, current and former EMCHS principals had some level of understanding of culturally responsive leadership. In addition, they actively sought to use practices reflective of CRL. Due to the purpose of the EMCHS setting and the diverse student populations these institutions serve, CRL is an instrumental component of the EMCHS principalship. This claim is evident in the EMCHS literature and in my research findings (Hammonds, 2016).

I believe there are implications of these findings in relation to college and university principal preparation programs, EMCHS principal supervisors and district leadership, novice EMCHS principals, and the EMCHS principalship influence. I discuss these implications next.

### **College and University Principal Preparation Programs**

Current literature argues that principal preparation programs have become too broad and lack the will or ability to provide students with specific training for various school types (Duke et al., 2007). I argue that the EMCHS principalship is a unique educational leadership position with unique components and experiences. Due to the uniqueness of the EMCHS principalship, the one-size-fits-all approach to educational leadership and principal training is ineffective when preparing prospective principals to lead in EMCHS settings. While there are many components of the EMCHS principalship

that are similar to the traditional school principalship, there are just as many experiences that are different. Hence, a one-size-fits-all approach would only be appropriate if it was coupled with preparation for specific EMCHS principal components. Considering the specific purpose and target population of the EMCHS, principal preparation programming that focuses on diversity in schools and culturally responsive leadership is of critical importance. Current literature suggests that principals feel they are not adequately prepared to lead in diverse settings; therefore, there is an urgent need for CRL training in principal preparation programs (Khalifa et al., 2016; Young et al., 2010).

### **EMCHS Principal Supervisors and District Leadership**

The limited research on EMCHSs suggests that since EMCHSs have special instructional areas of focus and student populations, there is a need to have different types of school leaders in these roles (Hill, 2017; Rich, 2011). In this study, I found that the EMCHS principals engage in role switching, feel isolated, and undertake a continual focus on community and relationship building. When considering prospective principals for EMCHS placements, it would benefit district leadership to lean towards candidates who are politically savvy, relationship oriented, multitaskers, collaborative, culturally responsive, and passionate about working with marginalized student populations. Additionally, in order for supervisors to better support EMCHS principals, they must themselves develop a deeper understanding of the EMCHS setting, purpose, and principalship. Duke et al. (2007) argue that differentiated leadership and support are vital because of the varying conditions principals face in their school settings. In this study, I found that relying on district supports and resources is a consistent way in which most

EMCHS principals attempted to navigate the unique components and experiences of their setting. District leaders must understand the nature of the EMCHS so that they can better support EMCHS principals.

### **New and Aspiring EMCHS Principals**

Based on the results of this research study, I contend that the EMCHS principalship has important differences when compared to the traditional school principalship. New and aspiring EMCHS principals should be able to navigate both the demands of their school district and college partner through communication and advocacy. They should be prepared to fill a multitude of roles and responsibilities that traditional school principals typically delegate to support staff, while still finding a way to practice shared leadership and foster collaboration. Principal Ashlee adds, “if you want to be an early-middle college principal, you need to understand that you’re going to be much more closely involved in every aspect of the school than you would be at a traditional high school.” These principals should also have a fundamental understanding of culturally responsive leadership and a passion to serve students from traditionally underserved groups. Lastly, EMCHS principals must stand firm in supporting the purpose of these special school settings, despite any distractions caused by various stakeholders who lack thorough understanding of the EMCHS setting and purpose.

### **EMCHS Principalship Influence**

This study included participants who had led both an EMCHS and a traditional high school. I found that the experiences from the EMCHS principalship greatly influenced participants’ leadership in their traditional school settings. Each of the study’s

participants who were currently traditional school principals credited practices or aspects of their leadership styles to the experiences they had while they served as principals in the EMCHS setting. This is important to note in terms of replication and scalability. In summary, practices that are successful in the EMCHS setting can be scaled up and replicated in traditional high schools.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Not only does the limited but growing body of literature on the EMCHS model suggest that these schools are successful in meeting the needs of marginalized student populations, but these unique settings are also growing in numbers across the country (Edmunds, 2012; Edmunds et al., 2012, 2013; Webb, 2014). In an attempt to expand upon this important work concerning the early/middle college high school model, I took a close look at the EMCHS principalship from a principal's point of view. To continue to expand this body of literature, I believe future studies that include the perceptions and experiences of EMCHS principal supervisors would be beneficial to understanding all we can about this unique principal role. Additionally, a future study involving a larger sample size of EMCHS principal participants from various states across the country would allow for a better understanding of this specific type of principalship. Lastly, a future study regarding the leadership styles of EMCHS principals would be helpful in identifying the unique skills and attributes that are associated with the position.

### **Conclusion and Personal Reflection**

This research study was a general qualitative study that included interviews and observations of current and former North Carolina EMCHS principals. I designed this

study to identify the unique experiences and challenges associated with the role, and how principals navigated these experiences and challenges. EMCHS principals' understanding and practice of culturally responsive leadership was also a focus of my study. The current research on EMCHSs is primarily focused on outcomes and the success of these programs. Through this study, however, I contribute to the limited body of literature focused on the EMCHS principalship. I found that EMCHS principals use their communication, collaboration, advocacy, and culturally responsive leadership skills to navigate the isolation and professional loneliness, misconceptions, competing institutional demands, and other unique experiences that are common in the EMCHS setting. If EMCHSs continue to grow as the research suggests, it would be important to have a strong understanding about the EMCHS principalship in order to adequately support principals new to this setting.

On a personal note, when I started this study on the EMCHS principalship, I was in my very first year as an EMCHS principal. I knew very little about the role I which I was serving, and even less about this unique setting. However, over the past 2 years, I have learned a great deal about this particular leadership role. Some of this learning came from trial and error over the years, and some came from being immersed in this research study. My initial feelings of professional loneliness within my building, and the difficulty I experienced in balancing the relationships between district and college personnel, were both confirmed by my findings from this study. Because of my positionality as a current EMCHS principal, moments of confirmation emerged far more than moments of surprise. However, it was surprising to hear current traditional school

principals credit their leadership styles and practices to the experiences of their EMCHS principalship.

Being able to interview and observe other EMCHS principals from across the state proved to be an irreplaceable experience for me, and one that is largely responsible for my professional growth as an EMCHS principal. What I learned from the ten other participants in this study has had a major influence on how I interact with my students, staff, parents, and college partner. On many occasions, I would return to my school from an interview or observation eager to implement the practices and strategies shared by the participants. Identical to what I found through my study, I utilized this informal network of peers to help navigate the various experiences and challenges I faced as an EMCHS principal. What is great about this experience is that I now have a relationship with several of these principals. I (and my research) can now be a support to them, as they were a huge support for me.



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evolution-early-college-high-schools

## APPENDIX A

### FIRST-ROUND INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### Interview Questions for EMCHS and Traditional Principal Experience

##### ***Demographic Information***

1. How long have you been an educator?
2. What roles besides administrator have you performed?
3. How would you describe your gender? How would you describe your race/ethnicity?

##### ***Introduction (Warm-Up):***

1. Please tell me a little about your educational background and experiences as a school administrator.
2. How many years of experience do you have as an EMCHS principal?
3. What type of school are you currently working in (EMCHS or Traditional)?
4. Was leading an EMCHS a choice of your or an assignment/placement?

##### ***What are the challenges and experiences of early/middle college high school principals?***

1. What are (were) your roles and responsibilities as principal of an EMCHS, and how do (did) they compare to your role as a traditional school principal?
2. Please describe a typical day at your current school, and how it compares to your administrative experiences in a (traditional or EMCHS) setting.
3. What, if any, EMCHS specific conditions influence(d)/affect(ed) your work as a school leader?
4. What do you believe is the most common misconception people have when considering the principalship of an EMCHS?

##### ***How do early/middle college high school principals navigate these challenges and experiences?***

1. Tell me about some specific challenges you face(d) as the principal in an EMCHS. What are (were) some ways in which you have overcome these challenges?
2. Please describe the greatest challenge you have (had) as an EMCHS principal. How do (did) you navigate this challenge?
3. Are there any challenges that you face(d) as an EMCHS principal that you failed to overcome or had difficulty overcoming? If so, what would you do differently if you had it to do over?

##### ***How do early/middle college principals understand the meaning of cultural responsiveness and how does it influence their practice?***

1. In your opinion, what is the purpose of EMCHS, and is (was) your school meeting that purpose?



2. Are you familiar with Culturally Responsive Leadership, if so how would you define it? If not, what would you assume it entails?
3. How important do you believe Culturally Responsive Leadership is to the EMCHS setting? Please explain your answer.
4. Are (were) you intentional about meeting the specific needs of marginalized (i.e. minority, 1st generation) student groups in your school? If so, what do (did) you do to meet these specific needs?

***Closing:***

1. Are there any particular points about either the challenges, how they are navigated, or culturally responsive leadership that you would like to stress or reiterate at this time?
2. Is there anything that I did not ask you that you feel is important to share about your role as EMCHS principal?
3. Would you be willing to participate in a 2nd round interview to go further into depth about any of the topics we discussed today?
4. Would you be willing to allow me to observe you for one day, to get a sense of a typical day for you in your role?

## **Interview Protocol for *EMCHS* Principal Experience Only**

### ***Demographic Information***

1. How long have you been an educator?
2. What roles besides administrator have you performed?
3. How would you describe your gender? How would you describe your race/ethnicity?

### ***Introduction (Warm-Up):***

1. Please tell me a little about your educational background and experiences as a school administrator.
2. How many years of experience do you have as an EMCHS principal?
3. Was leading an EMCHS a choice of your or an assignment/placement?

### ***What are the challenges and experiences of early/middle college high school principals?***

1. What are your roles and responsibilities as principal of an EMCHS?
2. Please describe a typical day at your current school.
3. What, if any, EMCHS specific conditions influence/affect your work as a school leader?
4. What do you believe is the most common misconception people have when considering the principalship of an EMCHS?

### ***How do early/middle college high school principals navigate these challenges and experiences?***

1. Tell me about some specific challenges you face(d) as the principal in an EMCHS. What are (were) some ways in which you have overcome these challenges?
2. Please describe the greatest challenge you have (had) as an EMCHS principal. How do (did) you navigate this challenge?
3. Are there any challenges that you face(d) as an EMCHS principal that you failed to overcome or had difficulty overcoming? If so, what would you do differently if you had it to do over?

### ***How do early/middle college principals understand the meaning of cultural responsiveness and how does it influence their practice?***

1. In your opinion, what is the purpose of EMCHS, and is your school meeting that purpose?
2. Are you familiar with Culturally Responsive Leadership, if so how would you define it? If not, what would you assume it entails?
3. How important do you believe Culturally Responsive Leadership is to the EMCHS setting? Please explain your answer.
4. Are you intentional about meeting the specific needs of marginalized (i.e. minority, 1st generation) student groups in your school? If so, what do you do to meet these specific needs?

*Closing:*

1. Are there any particular points about either the challenges, how they are navigated, or culturally responsive leadership that you would like to stress or reiterate at this time?
2. Is there anything that I did not ask you that you feel is important to share about your role as EMCHS principal?
3. Would you be willing to participate in a 2nd round interview to go further into depth about any of the topics we discussed today?
5. Would you be willing to allow me to observe you for one day, to get a sense of a typical day for you in your role?

**APPENDIX B**  
**SECOND-ROUND INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

**Principal Evette**

**Rationale:** Interviewee spoke of the various challenges and experiences that are tied to the EMCHS principalship, including the partnership with the community college.

**Pre-Observation Questions:**

1. What was the most challenging issue you have faced in the past few weeks?
2. Please describe your current relationship with the school's college partner.
3. What is on your agenda for today, and what are some things that you hope I get a chance to capture in my observations?

**Post-Observation Questions/Discussion:**

1. What from today's shadowing would you say is the most unique aspect of your role as an EMCHS principal as it is compared to the traditional school principalship?
2. Is there anything that I didn't get a chance to see today that would've helped to highlight the importance you place on culturally responsive leadership?

### **Principal Joseph**

**Rationale:** Interviewee spoke of actions, skills, and experiences (based on building relationships) used in the EMCHS setting that he brought to the traditional HS setting.

#### **Pre-Observation Questions:**

1. To what did you attribute the academic and social successes of your EMCHS students from groups who have traditionally been underserved in various school settings?
2. What strategies and approaches, if any, have you tried to incorporate into this traditional setting that was successful at the EMCHS?
3. What is on your agenda for today, and what are some things that you hope I get a chance to capture in my observations?

#### **Post-Observation Questions/Discussion:**

1. What from today's shadowing would you say is the most relevant as it pertains to the influence the EMCHS setting has had on your day to day leadership?
2. Is there anything that I didn't get a chance to see today that would've helped to highlight how the EMCHS setting has influenced your work as a school leader?

### **Principal Nichelle**

**Rationale:** Interviewee spoke of leading a school-wide focus and goals to improve the success of the Hispanic population. This is an example of the principals culturally responsive leadership.

#### **Pre-Observation Questions:**

1. Every school has a culture, how would you define your school's culture?
2. Why was it important for you to lead your school in a focus to improve the learning outcomes for your Hispanic population of students?
3. Are your plan to address the needs of Hispanic students written into your SIP? What is the actual goal?
4. What is on your agenda for today, and what are some things that you hope I get a chance to capture in my observations?

#### **Post-Observation Questions/Discussion:**

1. What from today's shadowing would you say is the most relevant as it pertains to your culturally responsive leadership?
2. How does culturally responsive leadership influence your day to day leadership?
3. Is there anything that I didn't get a chance to see today that would've helped to highlight the importance you place on culturally responsive leadership?

**APPENDIX C**

**OBSERVATION PROTOCOL**

<b>Research Questions:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. What are the challenges and experiences of early/middle college high school principals?</li><li>2. How do early/middle college high school principals navigate these challenges and experiences?</li><li>3. How do early/middle college high school principals demonstrate cultural responsive leadership in this particular setting?</li></ol>	
<b>Date of Observation:</b> __ / __ / ____	<b>Time Frame:</b> __:__ to __:__
<b>Location:</b>	<b>Focus of Observation:</b> Principal Behaviors
<b>Purpose:</b> To observe specific principal behaviors in relation to culturally responsive leadership, and a school-wide focus and goals to improve the success of the Hispanic population.	
<b>Post Observation Questions:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. How do you make sense of...?</li><li>2. Are _____ behaviors typical?</li><li>3. How does blank align with Culturally Responsive Leadership?</li></ol>	

<b>General Observations</b>	<b>Descriptive Field Notes</b>	<b>Reflective Field Notes</b>



<b>Culturally Responsive Leadership</b>	<b>Descriptive Field Notes</b>	<b>Reflective Field Notes</b>